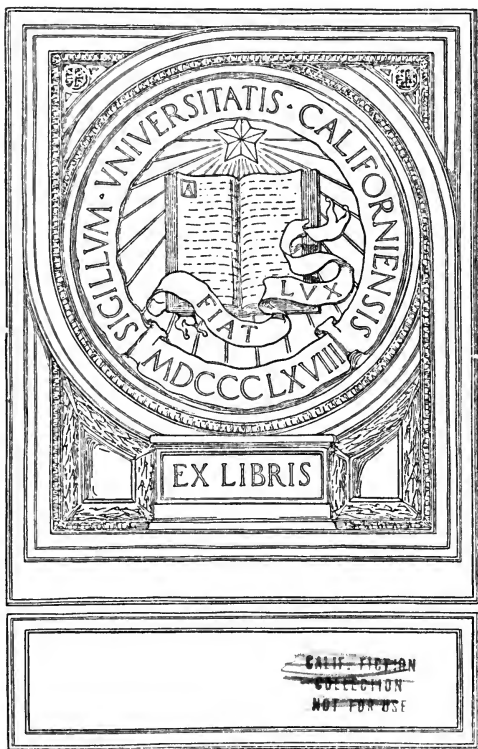


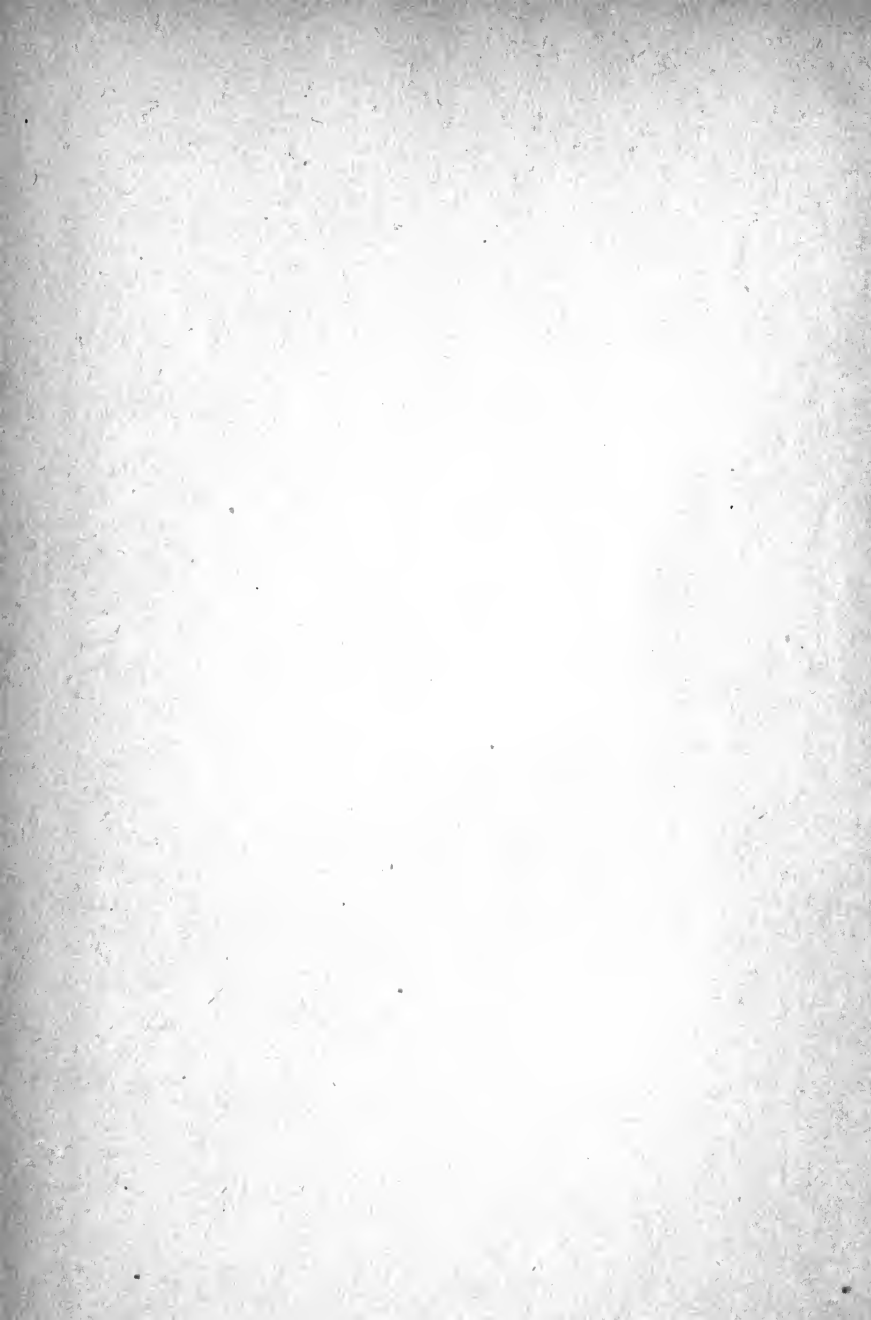


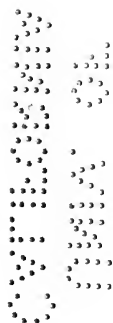
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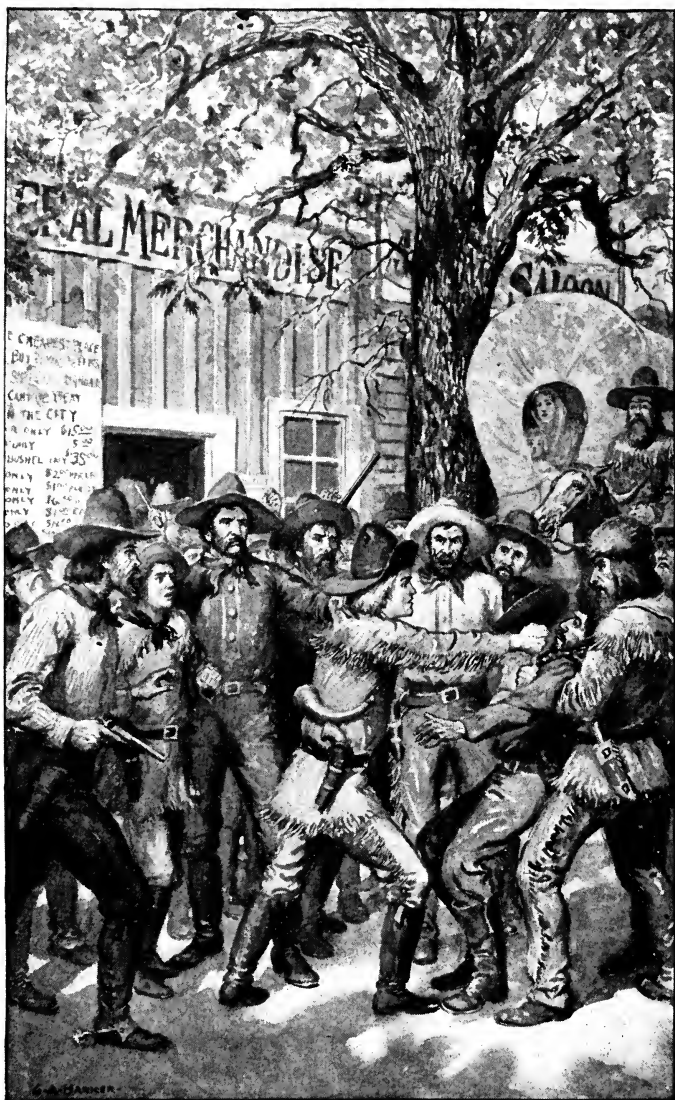
EVERETT McNEIL



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"YOU LIE!" AND THE HARD FIST LANDED SQUARELY ON THE MAN'S CHIN.

THE CAVE OF GOLD

A TALE OF CALIFORNIA IN '49

BY

EVERETT McNEIL

AUTHOR OF "FIGHTING WITH FREMONT," "IN TEXAS WITH DAVY CROCKETT," "WITH KIT CARSON IN THE ROCKIES," ETC.



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THE CAVE OF GOLD

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TO THE DESCENDANTS
YOUNG OR OLD
OF THE HARDY FORTY-NINERS
THIS STORY OF THE EXCITING DAYS
OF THE DISCOVERY OF GOLD IN CALIFORNIA
IS HOPEFULLY DEDICATED

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FOREWORD

ON a cold January morning of 1848, James Wilson Marshall picked up two yellow bits of metal, about the size and the shape of split peas, from the tail-race of the sawmill he was building on the South Fork of the American River, some forty-five miles northeast of Sutter's Fort, now Sacramento City. These two yellow pellets proved to be gold; and soon it was discovered that all the region thereabouts was thickly sown with shining particles of the same precious yellow metal. A few months later and all the world was pouring its most adventurous spirits into the wilderness of California.

This discovery of gold in California and the remarkable inpouring of men that followed, meant very much to the United States. In a few months it cleared a wilderness and built up a great state. In one step it advanced the interests and the importance of the United States half a century in the policies and the commerce of the Pacific. It threw wide open the great doors of the West and invited the world to enter. It poured into the pockets of the people and into the treasury of the United States a vast amount of gold—alas! soon to be sorely needed to defray the expenses of the most costly war

of the ages. Indeed, when the length and the breadth of its influence is considered, this discovery of gold in California becomes one of the most important factors in the developing of our nation, the great corner-stone in the upbuilding of the West; and, as such, it deserves a much more important place in the history of the United States than any historian has yet given to it.

In the present story an attempt has been made, not only to tell an interesting tale, but to interest the younger generation in this remarkable and dramatic phase of our national development, possibly the most picturesque and dramatic period in the history of the nation: to picture to them how these knights of the pick and the shovel lived and worked, how they found and wrested the gold from the hard hand of nature, and to give to them something of an idea of the hardships and the perils they were obliged to endure while doing it.

The period was a dramatic period, crowded with unusual and startling happenings, as far removed as possible from the quiet commonplaceness and routine life of the average boy and girl of to-day; and the reader is cautioned to remember this—if disposed at any time to think the incidents narrated in the present tale too improbable or too startling to have ever happened—that they could not happen to-day, even in California; but they might have all happened then and there in California.

The author is one of those who believe that the

boys and the girls of to-day should know something of the foundation stones on which the superstructure of our national greatness rests, and how and with what toils and perils they were laid; and, it is in the hope that the reading of this story will interest them in this, the laying of the great corner-stone in the upbuilding of the West, that this tale of the Discovery of Gold in California has been written.

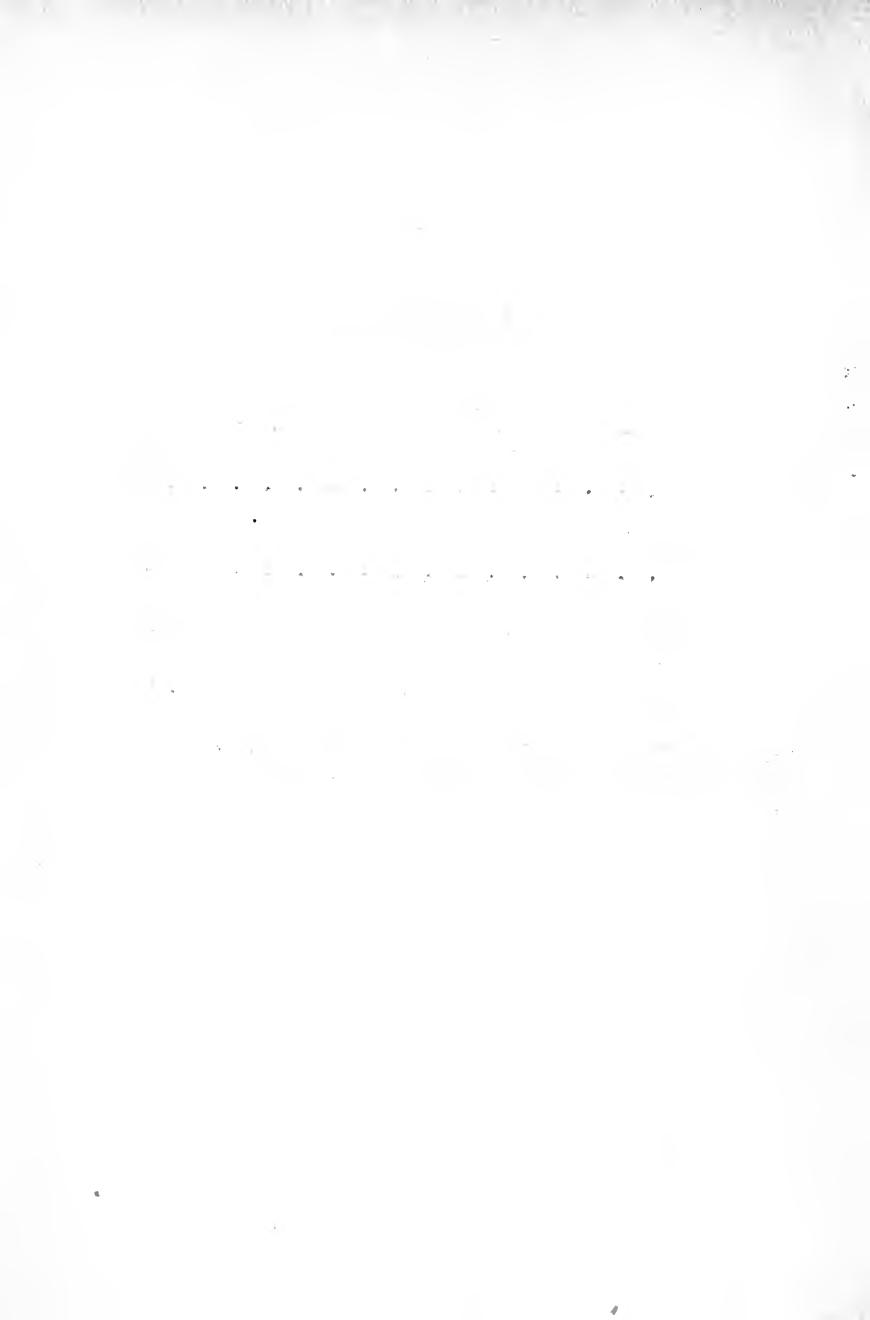
No nation can afford to forget its builders.

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The Cave of Gold

CHAPTER I

EL FEROZ

“**W**HOA!”—“whoa!” With quick jerks on their bridle reins Thure Conroyal and Bud Randolph pulled up their horses and listened shiveringly.

Again that same shrill whistling scream of dreadful agony and fear, that had caused them to rein up their horses so suddenly a moment before, came from the valley beyond the brow of the little hill up which they had been slowly riding, and chilled the very marrow in their bones with the terrible intensity of its fear and anguish. Then all was still.

“What—what was it?” and Thure turned a startled face to Bud. “It didn’t sound human and I never heard an animal scream like that before. What can it be?”

“I don’t know,” Bud answered, his face whitening a little; “but I am going to find out. Come on,” and, swinging his rifle into position where it would be ready for instant use, he started up the hill, his eyes fixed in the direction whence had come those fearful screams.

"We'd better go a little slow, until we find out what it is," cautioned Thure, as he quickly fell in by the side of Bud, his own rifle held ready for instant use. "It might be Indian devilment of some kind. You know dad's last letter from the mines said that the Indians were getting ugly; and if it is hostile Indians, we want to see them first."

"You bet we do," was Bud's emphatic rejoinder, as he again pulled up his horse. "Now, just hold Gray Cloud and I'll scout on ahead and see what's going on down there in the valley before we show ourselves," and, sliding swiftly from Gray Cloud's back, he tossed his bridle rein to Thure, and, rifle in hand, started swiftly and as silently as an Indian toward a thick clump of bushes that grew directly on the top of the little hill.

Thure deftly caught the bridle rein; and then sat silent and motionless on the back of his horse, his eyes on his comrade, waiting in tense expectancy for the moment when he would reach the clump of bushes and look down into the valley beyond and see the cause of those strange and terrible cries that had so suddenly and so fearfully startled them.

Bud, carrying his cocked rifle at trail, his form bent so that the least possible part of his body showed above the grass of the hillside, ran swiftly until he had almost reached the brow of the hill and the clump of bushes. Then, crouching closer to the ground, he crept cautiously and slowly to the bushes and, gently working himself into their

midst, carefully parted the branches in front of his face until he had a clear view of the little valley below. At the first sight he uttered an exclamation of surprise and wrath and threw his rifle to his shoulder; but, with a regretful shake of his head, he almost instantly lowered the gun, and, turning quickly about, motioned excitedly for Thure to advance with the horses and started on the run to meet him.

"Indians! Is it Indians?" Thure cried anxiously, the moment Bud was at his side.

"No," panted the boy, as he leaped into his saddle. "It's *El Feroz*; and if I've got anything to say about it, he has made his last kill. Come on," and his eyes glinted with wrath and excitement, as he dug his spurs into the flanks of Gray Cloud and galloped furiously up the hill.

"*El Feroz!* Bully!" and Thure, with an exultant yell, struck the spurs into his horse and galloped along by his side.

At the top of the hill both boys pulled up their horses and looked down into the valley. The valley was small, not more than half a mile across, and through its center ran a little stream of water, fringed with bushes and small trees. On the near side of this fringe of trees and bushes and only a short distance from where our two young friends sat on the backs of their horses, crouched a huge grizzly bear over the body of a horse that was still quivering in the death agony.

"The brute!" exclaimed Thure angrily, the moment his eyes had taken in this scene of violence. "So that was the death scream of a horse we heard! Well, I never want to hear another! But, we've got you now, you old villain!" and his eyes swept over the little valley, free, except for the fringe of trees and bushes, of all obstructions, exultingly. "If we let you get away from this, we'll both deserve to be shot. Now," and he turned to Bud, "you ride to the right and I'll go to the left and we will have the brute between us, so that if he charges either of us, the other can take after him and shoot or rope him."

"Good!" agreed Bud. "But, say, let's rope him first. Just shooting is too good for *El Feroz*. Remember Manuel and Old Pedro, whom he killed, and Jim Bevins, whom he tore nearly to pieces and crippled for life, to say nothing of the cattle and the horses he has killed. And now that we have him where he can't get away, I am for showing him that man is his master, strong and ferocious as he is, before killing him. We could not have picked out a better place for roping him, if we had been doing the picking," and his eyes glanced over the smooth level of the little valley. "We'll let him chase us until we get him away from the trees and bushes along the creek, and then we'll have some fun with the big brute with our ropes, before sending him to Kingdom Come with our bullets. What do you say, Thure?"

"Well," grinned Thure reminiscently, "if it don't turn out better than did our attempt to rope a grizzly when I was with Fremont, I say shoot the grizzly first and rope him afterward. Now, it won't be no joke roping *El Feroz*, even if everything is in our favor," and his face sobered. "Still, I reckon, our horses can keep us at a safe distance from his ugly claws and teeth; and it will be all right to have a try with the ropes before we use bullets, but we've got to be careful. *El Feroz* is the largest and ugliest grizzly ever seen anywhere around here, and could kill one of our horses with one blow of his huge paw. Mexican Juan says that an Indian devil has taken possession of the big brute and that only a silver bullet blessed by a priest can kill him; and, in proof of his belief, he told me that he himself had shot five lead bullets at *El Feroz* and that he had heard the devil laugh when the bullets struck and fell hot and flattened to the ground. Now he always carries a silver bullet with him that he had a priest bless when he was down to San Francisco last fall; and the next time he meets *El Feroz* he expects to kill him with the holy bullet. He showed me the silver bullet," and Thure laughed. "But I'm willing to put my trust in lead, if it hits the right spot, Indian devil or no devil. Now, look at *El Feroz*. He doesn't seem to be worrying none over our presence. Appears to think the filling of his greedy belly too important an operation to be interrupted by us," and Thure's eyes turned to where

the huge grizzly was tearing with teeth and claws the carcass of the horse, his wicked little eyes turned in their direction, but otherwise giving them not the slightest attention. Evidently *El Feroz* had only contempt for the puny prowess of man.

"Well, we'll soon teach him better manners, the ugly brute! Come on," and Bud Randolph and Thure Conroyal both started slowly toward the grizzly, loosening the strong ropes that hung from the pommels of their saddles as they rode.

There was no need of haste. *El Feroz* would not run away—not from a good dinner like that he was now eating—for all the men in California. For four years he had terrorized this part of California, had never once turned his back to a man, but had seen the backs of many men turned to him; and now the killing of the horse had aroused all the ferocity of his savage nature, and he was ready to fight anything and everything that threatened to rob him of his prey.

Thure Conroyal and Bud Randolph did not for a moment expect *El Feroz* to run, when they rode toward him. They knew grizzly nature, especially the ferocious nature of *El Feroz*, too well to dream of such a thing. They knew he would fight; and, if they had been afoot, they would not have dared to attack the evil monster, armed though they were with rifles and so skilful in their use that they could cut the head off a wild goose at a hundred yards. But, seated on the backs of their fleet and

well-trained horses and on a smooth and open field like the one before them, they did not fear even *El Feroz* himself. If their ropes did not hold or their bullets kill at once, the swift legs of their horses could be counted on to keep them out of danger, unless some unforeseen mischance happened.

The lassoing or roping of grizzly bears was a sport often indulged in by the native Californians, who were among the most skilful horsemen in the world and marvelously expert with their lassos or reatas, as they called the long rope, usually made of hide or woven horsehair, which they used to catch their horses and cattle; and Thure Conroyal and Bud Randolph had become as expert as any native with their reatas, and, consequently, felt equal to the roping of even as ferocious and as huge a beast as *El Feroz* himself, the most dreaded grizzly in the California mountains.

Thure and Bud rode slowly toward the grizzly, one turning a little to the left and the other to the right as he advanced, so that when they drew near to *El Feroz* there were some five rods of space between them. They had fastened their rifles to the saddles in front of them, to hold them safe and yet have them where they could be quickly seized in case of sudden need and to give them free use of both of their hands in throwing their ropes and in managing their horses; and now, as they advanced toward the bear, they uncoiled their reatas and began slowly swinging the loops around their heads

in readiness for the throw, while every faculty of their minds quickened and every muscle of their young bodies tightened in expectation of the coming battle that might mean death to one or both, if either blundered.

The grizzly glared furiously, first at one horseman then at the other, and tore more savagely than ever at the flesh of the horse, until both boys were almost upon him. Then, with a roar so savage and fearful that both horses, well-trained as they were, jumped violently, he reared up suddenly on his hind legs, the blood of the horse dripping from his reddened teeth, and, growling ferociously and swaying his huge head from side to side, he stood, for a moment, apparently trying to decide which one of those two venturesome humans he should tear to pieces first.

"Quick! Rope him around the neck before he charges!" yelled Thure. "I'll try to get one of his hind legs."

As Thure spoke Bud's lasso shot through the air; and the loop glided swiftly over the great head and tightened suddenly around the hairy neck, just at the moment the bear came to the decision to charge Thure and sprang toward him, with the result that the sudden unexpectedness of the jerk of Bud's rope yanked him off his feet and hurled him on his back.

Thure instantly saw his opportunity and before the huge beast could right himself, he had swiftly

cast the loop of his rope around one of the sprawling hind legs and drawn it tight.

"Hurrah! We've got him!" yelled Bud triumphantly, as Gray Cloud whirled about and stood facing the grizzly, his strong body braced backward so that he held the rope taut, as all well-broken California horses were trained to do the moment the thrown rope caught its victim.

"Got him! You bet we've got him!" echoed Thure, as his own horse whirled into position, with both front legs strongly braced, and drew the lasso tight about bruin's hind leg, thus stretching him out between the ends of the two reatas.

But they had not "got him"—not yet; for, just at that moment, all the ferocious bulk of raging bone and muscle that had given *El Feroz* his name of terror, gave a tremendous heave, whirled over on its feet; and, before either boy knew what was happening, Bud's lasso broke and about a ton of angry bear was hurling itself toward Thure.

The unforeseen mischance had happened with a vengeance!

Bud uttered a yell of warning and horror and caught at his rifle; but, almost before his hands could touch the gun, *El Feroz* was upon Thure and only a tremendous jump sideways of his brave little horse saved him from the sweep of one of those saber-armed paws.

The grizzly bear, for an animal of his huge bulk, is astonishingly agile and speedy, when once his

fighting blood is aroused; and, if ever a grizzly was fighting mad, that grizzly was now *El Feroz*. The instant he saw that he had missed the horse and man, he whirled about and was after them again; and, so swift was his turn and so sudden his charge, that, once again, only the superior horsemanship of Thure and the agility of the horse saved them from a sweeping blow of one of the great paws that came so close that Thure could feel the rush of its wind against his face.

"Out run him! Out run him!" yelled Bud excitedly. "Try to throw him with your rope; and I'll see if I can get a bullet in him," and he suddenly jerked up Gray Cloud, so that he could make his aim more sure, threw his rifle to his shoulder, and fired.

The ball struck the grizzly, but did not disable him. Indeed, the wound seemed rather to increase the terrible energy and rage with which he was striving to reach Thure and his horse with one of those powerful paws; and, for a dreadful moment, it appeared to Bud as if the huge beast might even overtake the speedy horse. Then he saw that Thure was slowly gaining, that the rope, which still clutched the hind leg of the grizzly, was slowly tightening; and, with breathless haste, he began reloading his rifle. He had had all the roping of *El Feroz* he wanted; and now his only desire was to get a bullet into the huge body, where it would

kill quickly, as speedily as possible. Suddenly, just as he was driving the bullet down into the barrel of his rifle, he heard a wild yell of exultation from Thure, and looked up just in time to see the hind part of the grizzly shoot upward into the air; and the next moment his astonished eyes saw the huge body dangling from a strong limb of an old oak tree, that thrust itself out from the sturdy trunk some fifteen feet above the ground, and held there by the grip of Thure's rope around one of the hind legs.

It needed but a glance for Bud to understand how this seemingly marvelous feat had been accomplished. The quick eyes of Thure had seen the tree, with its sturdy limb thrust out some fifteen feet above the ground, almost directly in the line of his flight; and, swerving a little to one side, so as to pass close to it, and slowing up his horse a bit, he had gathered up the slack of the rope in his hand, and, as he passed the tree, he had thrown it so that the middle of the rope had fallen over the top of the limb not far from the trunk; and then, of course, the rope had jerked the bear up into the air, and Thure had whirled his horse about, and now the well-trained animal stood, his fore legs braced, holding the struggling grizzly up to the limb.

"Shoot, shoot him quick, before the limb or the rope breaks!" yelled Bud, the moment his eyes had

taken in the situation, and, ramming the bullet swiftly home, he spurred Gray Cloud toward the dangling bear.

Thure at once seized his rifle; but so furious were the struggles of the grizzly—he hung just so that his fore paws touched the ground—as he twisted and turned and frantically pawed up the dirt, insane with rage, that it was impossible to get accurate aim from where he sat on his horse; and Thure jumped from his saddle and ran quickly close up to the swinging grizzly, now struggling more furiously than ever at the near approach of his hated enemy.

“Don’t! Look out! Can’t you see how the limb is bending and shaking?” yelled Bud excitedly. “The limb or the rope might break at any moment!” and Bud shuddered at the horror of the thought of what then might happen and urged his horse more desperately than ever toward the scene.

And, indeed, the huge body of the grizzly, twisting and swinging at the end of the rope, the blood flowing from the wound made by Bud’s bullet, his little red eyes glowing like coals of fire, his strong jaws snapping and growling, and his huge paws striking furiously in the direction of Thure, did make a sight to chill the marrow in the bones of any man.

Thure, now that he was so close to the bear that he could have touched him with the muzzle of his rifle, realized that, in his haste, he had done a fool-

hardy thing; but he was not the kind of a lad to back down from a position once taken, not until he had to do so, and, quickly bringing his rifle to his shoulder, he waited until the swaying body presented a fatal spot to his aim, pulled the trigger, and leaped backward from the bear.

It was fortunate for Thure that he made that backward jump; for, at the crack of his rifle, *El Feroz* made such a tremendous lunge toward him, that the creaking limb bent nearly double, and, with a sound like the report of a gun, broke off close to the trunk and crashed to the ground on top of the grizzly.

For a moment *El Feroz* lay stunned by his wounds and fall and the crash of the heavy limb; and then, with a roar, he struggled to his feet, just as Bud jerked Gray Cloud to a halt not a rod away, and, instantly throwing his rifle to his shoulder, fired. Even then the ferocious beast plunged desperately toward his new enemy, staggering blindly, and fell dead on the exact spot where Thure had stood.

"Jumping buffaloes, but that was a narrow escape for you, Thure!" and, throwing himself out of his saddle, Bud rushed up to where Thure stood, white and trembling, now that the danger was over, not ten feet from where the bear lay dead.

"But, we've got him! Got *El Feroz* himself!" and the blood surged back to Thure's face. "The biggest grizzly in all California! Say, but won't

the Mexicans and the Indians think we are great hunters now? And won't Ruth and Iola stare, when we throw down the hide of *El Feroz* in front of them to-night?"

No wonder Thure felt a little vainglorious over their achievement; for there was not a hunter in all that country who would not have considered the killing of *El Feroz* the crowning exploit of his life, so great had become the monster grizzly's reputation for savage ferocity and fearlessness of man.

"Well, I reckon we won't do any more hunting to-day," Bud declared, as he began swiftly reloading his rifle. In that country at that time no experienced hunter ever allowed his rifle to remain unloaded a moment longer than was necessary. "When we get the hide off that monster, it will be time to be starting for home," and his eyes turned to the dead grizzly. "Whew, but isn't he a whopper! I'll bet that he will weigh nearly a ton! You are right, the girls will be surprised some, when we throw down that hide in front of them," and his face flushed a little at the thought of the glory that would soon be theirs. "But, come, now that our guns are loaded, let's get busy with our knives and get this big hide off," and, pulling out his hunting-knife from its sheath, he bent over the huge carcass of *El Feroz*.

"I'll be with you as soon as I free Buck," and Thure, slipping the noose of his reata off the hind leg of the dead grizzly and coiling it around his

arm, hastened to where his gallant little horse still stood; and, after fastening the rope in its place on the pommel of the saddle, he hurried back to where Bud was bending over the grizzly.

There was no need of tying their horses. All the rope required to hold them fast was the rope of love they bore their young masters, and so the two animals were left free, while the two boys busied themselves getting the pelt off the bear.

The skinning of a grizzly bear, especially when the bear is as huge and as tough as was *El Feroz*, is no light undertaking; but Thure and Bud were no novices at this kind of labor, and, after half an hour's hard work, the great pelt was off and stretched out on the ground, skin side up.

"There, I am glad that job is done!" Thure exclaimed, with satisfaction, as he wiped his bloody knife on the grass. "Say, but he sure was a whopper!" and his eyes glanced exultantly over the great hide, now looking larger than ever as it lay spread out on the grass. "Great Moses, look at all those old bullet marks!—Fifteen of them! No wonder that Mexican Juan thought *El Feroz* was protected by the devil!—Hello, what is the matter now?" and Thure jumped up quickly from the hide, over which he had been bending counting *El Feroz's* old bullet wounds, at a sudden exclamation of alarm from Bud.

"There! There! Look there!" Bud was pointing excitedly up the valley.

"Mother of men, they are murdering him!" "Come on!" and Thure, grabbing up his rifle, made a jump for his horse, followed by Bud.

Three-quarters of a mile up the valley from where our young friends had slain the big grizzly, a spur of rocks projected down into the valley, reaching like a long finger almost to the fringe of trees along the creek; and around this spur of rocks three men had slowly ridden, and, just as they had come in sight from where the boys stood, Bud, whose eyes had happened to be turned in that direction, had seen two of the men suddenly and apparently without warning set upon the third man and, after a short struggle, knock him off his horse. It was this sight that had caused his sudden cry of alarm, followed by Thure's exclamation of horror, "They are murdering him!" and the quick jump of both boys for their horses.

It took Thure and Bud less than a minute to reach their horses and to spring up into their saddles; but, in that brief time, the unequal struggle up the valley was over, and the two men were bending over the prostrate body of their victim, apparently searching for valuables, when the two boys, with loud yells, spurred their horses at full speed toward them.

At the sound of their voices, the two men looked suddenly up, saw them coming, hastily grabbed up a few things from the ground, evidently taken from the man they were robbing, jumped to their feet,

sprang on the backs of their horses, and, before either boy was near enough to shoot, both had disappeared around the spur of rocks, lashing and spurring their horses frantically.

Thure and Bud jerked up their horses by the side of the fallen man and, jumping from their saddles, bent quickly over him.

"They've murdered him!" cried Bud, the moment his horrified eyes saw the white face and the blood-stained breast of the stricken man. "They have stabbed him! The cowardly curs!"

"No, he is not dead! I can feel his heart beat. The stab was too low to reach his heart. Quick, we must do something to stop this flow of blood, or he soon will be dead," and Thure tore open the bosom of the rough flannel shirt, exposing the red mouth of a knife wound from which the blood was flowing freely.

Thure and Bud were both familiar with the rough surgery of the plains and the mountains; and soon their deft hands had swiftly untied the silk scarfs from around their necks, plugged the wound with one of them and used the other to tightly bind and hold it in place.

"There, I think that will stop the blood! Now, let's see what other hurts he has," and Thure passed his hands gently over the man's head. "Two bumps—whoppers! Either enough to knock the senses out of an ox; but, I reckon, they've done no mortal damage. It's the stab wound that I am

most afraid of. What do you make out of it all anyway?" and Thure turned to Bud.

"Plain robbery and attempted murder," Bud answered gravely. "The man is evidently a miner," and his eyes rested on the long unkempt hair and beard, the weather-bronzed skin, and the rough worn clothing of the wounded man; "and was, probably, on his way from the mines to San Francisco with his gold-dust, when those two cowardly curs met him and, finding out that he was from the mines, attempted to murder him for his gold."

"Reckon you're right," agreed Thure. "Leastwise there's no use of speculating over it longer now. The thing to do is to get him home as soon as we can. Mother is powerful good doctoring hurts. Just see if you can get him up on the saddle in front of me. I reckon that'll be the safest way to carry him," and Thure mounted his horse, while Bud thrust his sturdy young arms under the body of the insensible man and, as gently as possible, lifted him to the saddle, where the strong arms of Thure held him as comfortably as possible.

"Now, I'll strike out straight for home," Thure said, as he started Buck off on a walk with his double burden; "and you can ride back and get the hide of *El Feroz*, and soon catch up with me."

"All right. I'll be with you again as soon as I can," and Bud sprang on the back of Gray Cloud and started off on a gallop for the scene of the contest with the grizzly.

How wonderful it is that the tenor of our whole after lives may be, nay, frequently is, completely changed by some seemingly unimportant circumstance or unexpected happening. If Thure Conroy and Bud Randolph had not heard the death-cry of that horse and had not turned aside to see what had caused those agonizing sounds, they would not have been delayed, by their contest with the grizzly, until the coming of the three men, nor have witnessed the attack on the miner; and, if they had not seen this attack on the miner and hurried to his rescue, they never would have heard the miner's marvelous tale, nor have secured the skin map; and, if they had not heard the miner's tale and secured the skin map— But, I must let the story itself tell you all that resulted from these unexpected and seemingly unimportant happenings.

CHAPTER II

DEATH OF THE MINER

CALIFORNIA and 1849! Magical combination of Place and Date! The Land of Gold and the Time of Gold! The Date and the Place of the opening of Nature's richest treasure-house! Gold—free for all who would stoop and pick or dig it out of the rocks and the dirt! The beginning of the most wonderful exodus of gold-mad men in the history of the world! "Gold! Gold!! GOLD!!! CALIFORNIA GOLD!" The nations of the world heard the cry; and the most enterprising and daring and venturesome—the wicked as well as the good—of the nations of the world started straightway for California. Towns and cities sprang up, like mushrooms, in a night, where the day before the grizzly bear had hunted. In a year a wilderness became a populous state. A marvelous work to accomplish, even for an Anglo-Saxon-American nation; but, get down your histories of California, boys, and you will learn that we did accomplish that very thing—built a great state out of a wilderness in some twelve months of time!

Of course, Thure and Bud (Bud with the griz-

zly's hide had soon overtaken Thure), as they rode along over the soft grass of the Sacramento Valley, on this clear July afternoon of the eventful year of 1849, did not realize that all these wonderful things were happening or were about to happen in their loved California. They knew that a great gold discovery had been made in the region of the American River some forty miles northeast of Sutter's Fort. Indeed, for the last year, all California had gone gold-mad over this same discovery; and now every able-bodied man in the country, who could possibly get there, was at the mines. Stores, ranches, ships, pulpits, all businesses and all professions had been deserted for the alluring smiles of the yellow god, gold, until it might be truthfully said, that in all California there was but one business and that one business was gold-digging.

The devastating gold-fever had swept over the Conroyal and the Randolph ranchos; and had left, of all the grown-up males, only Thure and Bud, who, not yet being of age, had been compelled to stay, much against their wills, to care for the women folks and the ranchos, while their fathers and brothers and all the able-bodied help had rushed off, like madmen, to the mines; and only their loyalty to their loved mothers and fathers had kept them from following. Now, the one great hope of their lives was to win permission to go to the mines, where men were winning fortunes in a day, and try their luck at gold-digging.

The Conroyal rancho, the Randolph and the Conroyal families had united, when the men went to the mines, and both families were now living at the Conroyal rancho, was some five miles from the scene of the robbery and attempted murder of the miner; and, for the first two miles of the homeward ride, the wounded man lay unconscious and motionless in Thure's arms. Then he began to move restlessly and to mutter unintelligible things.

"He sure isn't dead," Thure declared, as the struggles of the man nearly pitched both of them out of the saddle. "Just give me a hand, Bud; for, I reckon, we'll have to lower him to the ground until he gets his right senses back or quits this twitching and jerking. I am afraid he will start the wound to bleeding again."

Bud quickly sprang off the back of his horse; and together and as gently as possible the two boys lowered the wounded miner from the saddle and laid him down on a little mound of grass. A few rods away a small stream of water wound its way, half-hidden by tall grass and bushes and low trees, through the little valley where they had stopped.

"Get your hat full of water," Thure said, as he bent down to see if the bandage over the wound was still in its place. "Seems to me he ought to be getting his senses back by this time."

Bud at once started off on the run for the water and soon was back with his broad-brimmed felt hat full of the cooling fluid; and, kneeling down by the

side of the wounded man, who now lay quiet, with eyes closed, although he was still muttering incoherently, he bathed the hot forehead and the swollen lumps on the back of his head.

Suddenly the miner's eyes opened and stared wonderingly around him and up into the faces of the two boys. For a minute he did not seem to be able to comprehend what had happened. Then the blank wondering look suddenly left his eyes.

"Did they get the gold?" and his hand went quickly to his waist. There was no belt there. "Gone! A good twenty pounds of as fine gold as was ever dug from the earth, gone!—Gods, if they had but given me any kind of a show, they would not have got it so easily!" and his eyes flamed and he attempted to sit up, but fell back with a groan and a whitening face.

For a minute or two he lay with eyes closed, breathing heavily. Evidently he was trying to collect his thoughts, to realize his situation. When he opened his eyes again there was a solemn, an awed look in them that had not been there before, and the anger had gone.

"I have been stabbed," he said slowly, "and I am dying."

"No, no. The knife did not go near your heart. It struck too low. You will soon be all right again. Wait until we get you home and mother will soon make a whole man of you. Mother is about the best nurse in all California," and Thure gripped one of

the hard toil-worn hands and smiled encouragingly.

"No." As the man spoke his eyes never once left Thure's face. "No, I am dying. I know. I was once a surgeon, an army surgeon." For a moment his eyes darkened, as if with bitter recollections. "But, what matters the past now? Let it bury its dead," and he smiled grimly. "This is death. I know. I have seen many die just this way. Internal hemorrhage, we doctors called it. The blood from the wound is flowing into my body. I can feel it. I have half an hour, possibly an hour to live; and then—" The awed look in the eyes deepened, and, for a couple of minutes, he did not speak, but lay staring straight up into the blue skies. Suddenly his white lips tightened and he turned to Thure.

"How far is it to your home and to your mother?" he asked abruptly.

"About three miles; but I can carry you so easily that I am sure—"

"Too far," the wounded man broke in impatiently. "I might die before I got there. No, this shall be my deathbed—the soft green grass, canopied by the blue skies—a fitting end, a fitting end," he added gloomily.

"Come, come," and Thure tried to make his voice sound cheery and full of hope. "Never say die, until you are dead. Just wait until we get home and mother will put new life into you. Now, I'll

get on my horse, and Bud will lift you up into my arms, and we'll be home before you know it," and Thure jumped to his feet and started toward his horse.

"No, come back," and the miner impatiently lifted himself up on one elbow. "Come back. I have no time to waste riding three miles for a deathbed. I—" Again the keen eyes searched the faces of the two boys. "I have much to say and little time in which to say it. Get that bearskin off your horse and make me as comfortable as possible on it. And be quick about it; for I am going fast, and, before I go, I want to make you two boys my heirs for saving me from those two villains. The cowardly curs! They hit me from behind!" and again the eyes flamed with anger. "They got the gold I had with me and they got me; but they did not get the secret of Crooked Arm Gulch, nor learn how to find its Golden Elbow. Curse them! If I could but live, I'd— But, what's the use?" and he sank back white-lipped on the grass. "That knife stab in the breast has done for me. And just when the golden key that unlocks all the doors of pleasure and power was tight-gripped in my very fingers! Just my luck! But," and the look of somber resignation came back into the pain-racked eyes, "I'll not die like a snarling, whining coyote. I'll meet death, as I have met life—face to face, with both eyes wide open. Now," and he turned to Bud, who had hurried to his horse and, unloosening the bear-

skin, had hastened back with it and spread it out on the grass, soft hair up, by the side of the wounded man, "lay me on the skin and stuff something under my head and shoulders, so as to keep the blood from flooding my lungs and heart as long as possible; for I have that to tell that must not wait, even for death," and the white lips tightened firmly.

Thure and Bud, anxious to do everything possible to ease the last moments of the dying man, now carefully lifted him and laid him down on the skin of the grizzly bear as gently as possible. Then, taking off one of the saddles and their own coats, they placed the saddle, softened by the folded coats and the bearskin, under the head and the shoulders of the miner; and only the white tight-drawn lips and the burning eyes told of the intense pain that he must have suffered while the change was being made.

For a couple of minutes the wounded man lay silent on the bearskin, with closed eyes, breathing heavily. Then he suddenly opened his eyes and turned them resolutely on the two boys, who stood, one on each side, bending anxiously over him.

"There, that is better," he said. "That is all you can do for me. Now, sit down close to my head, so that you can hear every word that I say; for never did dying lips have a more important message to utter, never did mortal leave a richer inheritance to mortal than I am about to leave to you. Gold—

a cave paved with gold! Gold—a cave walled with seams of gold! Gold—bushels, barrels of gold nuggets, to be picked up, as you pick up pebbles from the stony bed of a river! Gods, if I could but live!” Again the blood flushed back into the white cheeks and the eyes glowed with feverish excitement.

“There! There!” and Thure laid a cool hand on the hot forehead. “Never mind the gold now. When you have rested a bit and have recovered some of your strength, Bud and I will rig up a stretcher out of the bearskin and carry you home between us; and then, when you are comfortably fixed in a soft bed, you can tell us all about this wonderful cave of gold.”

No wonder Thure thought all this wild talk about the marvelous cave of gold but the delirium of a dying man and tried to quiet the sufferer; but the miner would not be quieted, and, roughly brushing the hand from his forehead, he turned his glowing eyes full on Thure’s face.

“You think I am raving,” he said, “that this cave of gold exists only in the disordered fancy of a dying man. Well, I will show you. Thrust your hand under my shirt, beneath my right shoulder, and pull out the small bag you will find there. Quick!” he cried impatiently, as Thure hesitated. “You forget that I am a dying man and have not a minute of time to waste.”

Thus admonished, Thure hastily thrust his right

hand under the miner's shirt, as directed, and pulled out a small buckskin bag, fastened by a buckskin thong about the miner's shoulder. The weight of the bag, for it was only some seven inches long by three inches wide, surprised him.

"Cut the strings and open the bag," commanded the miner.

Thure quickly did as bidden.

"Now, see what is inside of the bag."

Thure thrust his hand into the bag and drew out a long, tightly rolled piece of white parchment-like skin.

"That is the skin map. Never mind that now. Turn the bag bottom side up and shake it."

Thure caught hold of the bottom of the bag with his fingers, turned it over and gave it a vigorous shake; and then sat staring wildly at the object that had fallen, with a thud, on the bearskin by his side. He was looking at a solid nugget of gold nearly as large as, and shaped very much like his fist!

"Pick it up! Lift it!" urged the miner, his eyes shining with excitement. "It is gold, pure, virgin gold, just as God made it! I picked it up off the bottom of the cave, where there are thousands of other smaller nuggets. In the light of my torch they sparkled and shone until the floor of the cave seemed flooded with golden light. In the two hours I was there I gathered up the Five Thousand Dollars' worth of gold nuggets the robbers stole from

me and that nugget, all that I dared take with me; for the way out of Crooked Arm Gulch is not a road over which a man more heavily burdened would care to venture. I had no food with me, no horses; and I must hurry back, where food, on which to live, and horses, on which to carry my supplies to the cave and the gold away from it, could be bought. I—”

“And you found this hunk of gold on the floor of that cave?” Thure who had been lifting and examining the nugget with widening eyes, could control his excitement no longer. “And you say that there are thousands of other nuggets where this came from?”

“Yes, yes! I have been telling you God’s truth,” and the face grew white and drawn with pain again. “But, don’t interrupt me. I—I have only a few minutes left. The nugget, the gold, all is yours. I—I bequeath it to you with my dying breath. The map—the skin map—will tell you where to find it—North—northeast from Hangtown—a good five days’ tramp—No miners there yet—Deep—steep canyon—Lot’s Canyon—Tall white pillar of rock standing near Crooked Arm Gulch—Must look—sharp—to find gulch opening—Blocked by great—rocks—Big tree—Climb to third limb. Remember—climb to third limb—third limb—third—My God!—My God!” and both hands clutched madly at his throat.

His breath was now coming in quick heaving gasps; and only by a supreme effort of will was he able longer to command his wavering reason.

"Quick—quick," he gasped, his voice coming in a hoarse whisper. "Bend your heads close. Beware of the two men who robbed and murdered me—I—I told them of the cave of gold; but I did—did not tell them where it is; and—and they—can—cannot find it without the skin map—They—they murdered me for—for that map; but they did not get it—It—it was not in—in my money-belt, as they thought. Guard that map—They—they would kill—kill you to get it. One is a huge red-haired man with a broken nose—The other is—is small, with pock-marked face—Beware—beware pock—pock-marked face and—and broken nose—I—God—I—"

Again he clutched violently at his throat; and then a great wondering look of awe came into his eyes, now staring straight up into the blue skies, and his form stiffened suddenly.

Thure and Bud could endure the dreadful sight no longer and turned their horrified eyes away; and, when, a couple of minutes later, they again looked on the face of the miner, he was dead, with a smile on his grim lips and a look of peace on his face, as if the coming of Death, at the very last, had been a most pleasant and joyous event.

CHAPTER III

THE SKIN MAP

NO mortal can look on death unmoved. Savage or civilized, Christian or pagan, a great awe, a questioning wonder thrills the spirits of all who stand in the presence of the dread, unsolvable mystery, death. The soul asks questions that cannot be answered, that the ages have left unanswered. And, as Thure and Bud now stood, with uncovered heads, looking down on the quiet, peaceful face and the motionless, rigid form of the dead miner, the world-old awe and wondering concerning death thrilled their hearts. For a couple of minutes neither spoke, neither moved. Then Thure's eyes sought the face of Bud.

"He is dead," he said solemnly.

"He is dead," answered Bud, not moving his awed eyes from the still face.

"Dead!" and Thure bent and reverently straightened out the bent legs and arms and smoothed back the matted hair from the forehead. "Dead, yes, as dead as a stone; and yet a few minutes ago he was breathing and talking! What a queer thing life is anyhow! Well, it won't do neither him nor us any good to stand here thinking and talking about it.

Now we must get the body to the house and give it as decent a burial as possible. I'll carry the body across the saddle in front of me. Come, let's hurry. I am getting anxious to have it over."

For the moment, so great had been the shock of the miner's sudden death, Thure and Bud had forgotten all about the dead man's marvelous tale of the Cave of Gold; but now, as Bud stooped to help lift the body from the bearskin, his eyes caught the yellow glow of the gold nugget, which lay on the skin by the side of its unfortunate finder, and the sight recalled the wondrous tale.

"What do you think of his story about finding that nugget in a cave where the floor is covered with gold nuggets as thickly as pebbles on the bed of a stony river? Do you suppose it is true or, just one of the queer notions that sometimes come to the dying?" and Bud looked wonderingly from the nugget to Thure's face.

"Great Moses, I forgot all about the gold!" and Thure's face flushed with excitement. "Quick, let's get the body on the grass and then we'll have another look at the nugget. That was a powerful queer story he told; but it might be true. And if it is true," and his eyes sparkled, "then we've just got to go to the mines and hunt up our dads and the others and get them to help us find that cave."

In a moment more they had lifted the body off the bearskin and had laid it down on the grass; and the gold nugget was in their hands.

"Glory! But isn't it heavy?" and Bud balanced the nugget in one hand. "And it looks and feels and weighs like gold! It must be gold."

"It sure does look like gold," agreed Thure. "It looks and feels just like the nuggets dad sent home, only larger. Oh, if we only could find the cave where it came from! Let me see, he said that it was in the Golden Elbow of Crooked Arm Gulch, in Lot's Canyon, near a white pillar of rock and a big tree that we must climb to the third limb—a mighty queer place I call that to find a cave! I reckon he must have been lunatic," and Thure turned a disappointed face to Bud.

"Well, he certainly found gold, and this proves it," and Bud tossed the big nugget up in the air and caught it as it came down, "to say nothing of the five thousand dollars' worth of gold nuggets that he claims his murderers stole from him. But, didn't he say something about a map, a skin map, that would tell us how to find the cave?" and his face lighted.

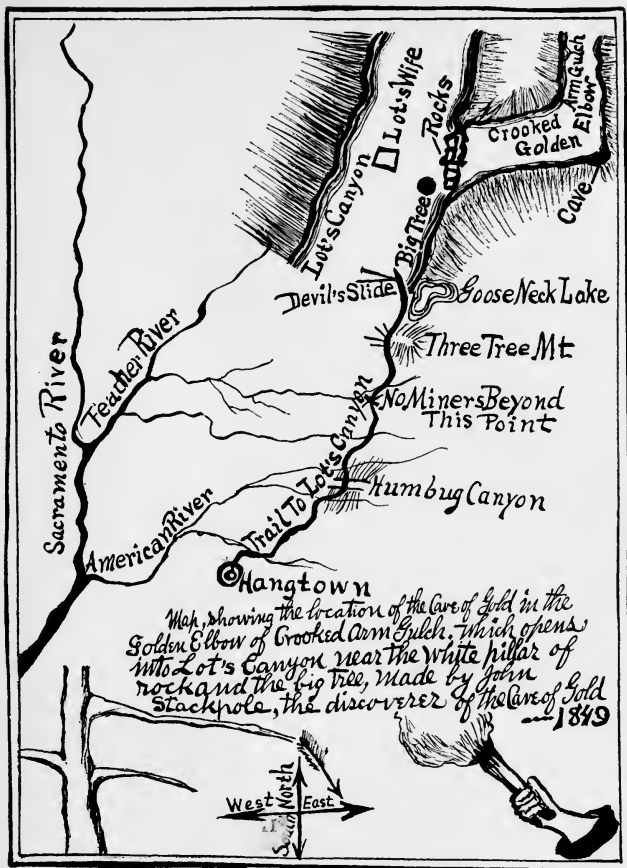
"Yes, yes, that was the little roll of white skin I pulled first out of the bag," and Thure's eyes searched eagerly the ground. "Here it is!" and, stooping quickly, he picked up the little roll of white parchment-like skin that he had pulled out of the little bag and dropped on the ground, and began unrolling it with fingers that trembled with excitement, while Bud crowded close to his side, his eyes on the unrolling piece of tanned skin.

The skin was some ten inches long by seven inches wide, of a somewhat stiff texture, and tanned so that it was nearly white. On the inner side an unskilled hand had rudely drawn a map; and beneath the map was written the words:

Map, showing the location of the Cave of Gold in the Golden Elbow of Crooked Arm Gulch, which opens into Lot's Canyon near the white pillar of rock and the big tree, made by John Stackpole, the discoverer of the Cave of Gold.—1849.

In the lower left-hand corner of the map was a rudely drawn tree, with three huge limbs, and, from near the end of the upper and third limb, an arrow pointed slantingly downward, away from the trunk of the tree. In the lower right-hand corner was a hand holding a flaming torch. Between the tree and the torch was a cross, marked with the four main points of the compass. In the lower left-hand corner of the map itself was a small circle, marked "Hangtown"; and from there a crooked line trailed in a northeasterly direction to the upper right-hand quarter of the skin, where a map of Lot's Canyon and Crooked Arm Gulch was drawn with considerable detail.

For a couple of minutes the two boys studied this map in silence, while the conviction that the Cave of Gold was no deathbed hallucination, but a wonderful reality, grew upon them; or else, how came



THE SKIN MAP.

Map, showing the location of the Cave of Gold in the Golden Elbow of Crooked Arm Gulch, which opens into Lot's Canyon near the white pillar of rock and the big tree, made by John Stackpole, the discoverer of the Cave of Gold - 1849



the skin map, which evidently had been made many days ago?

"Hangtown!" and Thure pointed excitedly to the name on the map. "That's the name of the mining camp where dad was when he wrote last. And here," and his finger followed up the trail marked on the map, "is Lot's Canyon! and the Big Tree! and Crooked Arm Gulch! and the Golden Elbow! and—and this black spot, marked 'cave,' right at the point of the Golden Elbow, must be the Cave of Gold! Great Moses, but I believe the miner did actually find that Cave of Gold, just as he said he did!" and Thure's eyes and face glowed with excitement.

"So do I," Bud agreed emphatically. "The skin map, the gold nugget—why, even his murder! all go to prove the truth of his tale. The robbers killed him to get this map. They could have got the gold without killing and got away all right; but they knew of the Cave of Gold and the map—the miner said he told them—and, expecting to get the map along with the gold, they killed him to get him out of the way, so that they could have all the gold in the cave to themselves. Say, but let's hurry home and tell our mothers. They can't refuse to let us go to the mines now! And we must start just as soon as possible. Come," and, for the moment, in his excitement, forgetting the dead body of the miner, he started to mount his horse.

"But, we can't leave him there!" and Thure pointed to the body. "Just help me to get him up

on the horse in front of me and then we'll get home as soon as possible," and, picking up the little buckskin bag, he slipped the nugget and the map back into it, thrust it into his pocket, and soon, with the help of Bud, was on his horse, with the body of the dead miner in front of him.

Bud now quickly threw the grizzly bearskin back on his horse, jumped into his saddle, and the homeward journey was resumed.

CHAPTER IV

AT THE CONROYAL RANCHO

WHEN Thure, bearing in his arms the dead body of a man, and Bud, with the huge skin of a grizzly bear hanging across the back of his horse behind the saddle, rode into the open court in front of the Conroyal rancho, there was great excitement; and, even before they could dismount, they were surrounded by a crowd of gesticulating, question-shouting women and children and old decrepit men, all wild with curiosity to know what had happened. In the midst of all this excitement, the door of the house was flung open and two young ladies catapulted themselves through the crowd to where Thure and Bud sat on their horses.

"Mercy! What has happened?" and Iola Conroyal, her horrified eyes fixed on the face of the dead miner, came to a sudden halt by the side of Thure, with Ruth Randolph, round-eyed and white-faced, clinging to one of her arms. "Is—is he dead?"

"Yes, he is dead," Thure answered gravely. "Murdered for his gold." Then, seeing how white the faces of the two girls had suddenly grown, he added quickly: "You girls hurry right back into the house and tell your mothers that we found a

miner, who had been robbed and stabbed, and started to bring him home with us, but that he died before we got here; and ask them to have some blankets laid on the floor of the sala for the body to lie on and a sheet to cover it. Now, hurry. We'll tell you how it all happened later," and not until the two girls were back in the house did Thure make a move to get rid of his ghastly burden. Then, reverently the body of the dead miner was lowered from the horse, and borne into the large hall-like room of the house known as the sala, and laid down on the blankets there prepared for it, and covered over with a sheet.

In the meantime Bud had thrown the great hide of the grizzly to the ground with the information that it was the skin of *El Feroz* himself.

"How did you kill him?" "Who shot him?" and, with shouts of wonder and delight, all the men and the boys, who had not gone into the sala with the body of the dead miner, crowded around the skin of the fallen monarch.

"Thure and I found the old villain just after he had killed a horse, and shot him," Bud answered hastily, anxious to get to his mother with the wonderful news of the Cave of Gold as quickly as possible. "Here, Angelo!" and he turned to a young Mexican boy standing near, "Take my horse and see that he is properly cared for. And you, Juan, take the hide of *El Feroz* and let us see how fine a robe you can make out of it."

"Si, si, señor," answered the old Mexican exultingly. "He, the ugly brute, kill my wife's brother, Pedro, whom I, like my own brother, loved, and 'twill give my soul peace one fine robe to make out of his big skin. A great glory, the killing of *El Feroz*, señor," and his old eyes kindled. "Your fame like a swift horse will travel."

"Shucks! Any hunter could have got him the same as we did," and Bud hurried into the house, all care for the glory of killing *El Feroz* having been driven out of his head by the dying miner's remarkable revelations.

At the door of the house Bud was met by his mother and Mrs. Conroyal, with Ruth and Iola close behind them. The bringing of the dead body of the murdered miner into the house had greatly excited both women.

"My son," Mrs. Randolph cried the moment she caught sight of Bud, "what means this tale of murder and robbery and the bringing of the dead body of a strange man into the house?"

"Oh, mother, mother," and Bud excitedly caught hold of his mother's hand, "the most wonderful, the most marvelous thing has happened!"

"What?" and the astonished and horrified woman caught hold of both of his shoulders and shook him. "Have you gone clean crazy, Bud Randolph, to speak of murder and robbery like that?"

"I—I," stammered Bud, "I forgot the dead miner. We were too late to save him; but he lived long

enough to tell us—" He stopped abruptly and glanced swiftly around the room. The secret of the Cave of Gold must not be proclaimed from the housetops! There was no one in the room with himself, but the two women and the two girls. "Mother, Mrs. Conroyal," he continued, lowering his voice, "the old miner before he died told Thure and me of a wonderful Cave of Gold that he had discovered in a gulch somewhere in the mountains; and he made Thure and me his heirs, and gave us a map, showing the way to the cave, and a huge gold nugget, which the robbers did not get, that he said he had found in the cave, and he— But here is Thure! He has the—"

"Hush! Not so loud!" and Thure, who at that moment stepped into the room from the sala, where the body of the dead miner lay, lifted a warning hand. "There are many ears in there," and he pointed to the door he had just closed behind him, "that must not hear what we have to tell. Come, let us go to your room, mother, where there won't be any danger of what we have to tell you being overheard," and he started for Mrs. Conroyal's private room, followed by Bud and the two wondering women and the girls.

"I—I," and Thure stopped at the door of his mother's room and looked hesitatingly at Iola and Ruth, "I—I reckon it is too great a secret to tell you two girls just now. You had better wait—"

"No!"—"No!" broke in both girls indignantly,

while Ruth, looking as if she would like to box Thure's ears, declared:

"We girls can keep a secret just as well as you boys can, and you know it; for, haven't we saved you from many a licking by not telling your dads what you had been up to? But if this is the way you are going to treat us, we'll fix you next time," and she shook her head threateningly.

"Besides," supplemented Iola triumphantly, "we know most of the secret already. It's about a Cave of Gold and a map and—"

"Oh, Christmas! You couldn't keep nothing from the girls!" and the face Thure turned to Bud showed his disgust.

"Well, I reckon the secret is just as safe with them as it is with us," protested Bud stoutly, flushing a little, "especially when they know how important it is to keep it secret. You will never tell a word of it to anybody, will you girls? It—it might mean murder, if you did."

"No, no," affirmed Iola emphatically. "We'll not breathe a word of it to a living human being. We'll die first. We'll not disappoint your trust in us, Bud," and she glanced a bit scornfully from Bud to her brother. "Will we, Ruth?"

"Never," and Ruth's red lips closed tightly over her pearly teeth. "Do you suppose we'd betray those we love?" and her eyes flashed indignantly.

"All right. See that you don't, then," and Thure's face cleared. To tell the truth he was just

a little ashamed of the lack of confidence he had shown in his sister and Ruth. "Anyhow, you know so much now that you might as well be told the rest, so come on," and he opened the door and carefully closed and locked it, when all had entered the room.

It did not take many minutes for the two eager boys to tell the story of the day's remarkable experiences, from the killing of the great grizzly to the death of the old miner; for the narrative, under the lash of their active tongues, proceeded in running jumps, from the beginning to the end and was never allowed to lag an instant.

"And now," concluded Thure excitedly, when the last of the wonderful tale had been told, "Bud and I must both start for the mines just as soon as we can get ready; and get father and Rex and Dill and Uncle Frank and Hammer Jones to help us find this Cave of Gold; and when we have found it—"

"But," broke in Mrs. Conroyal, smiling at Thure's enthusiasm, although her own face was flushed and her eyes were sparkling with excitement, "where is this wonderful gold nugget and skin map, that you tell us the miner gave you in proof of his remarkable story? You seem to forget that you have not yet shown us your proof."

"Here, here it is!" and the excited boy thrust one hand into his pocket and triumphantly pulled out the small buckskin bag; and, swiftly turning the bag bottom side up, dumped its contents into his

mother's lap; and the next moment, the two women and the two girls were as excitedly examining the big nugget and the rude skin map as ever they had been examined by the two boys.

"And the miner told you that the bottom of the cave was covered with gold nuggets like this?" queried Mrs. Randolph, her eyes shining, as she held up the nugget.

"Yes, yes," answered Bud. "Thousands of them, only smaller. Of course he picked up the biggest that he could see. We can go to the mines now, can't we, mother?"

"And this queer skin map tells you how to find this wonderful Cave of Gold?" and Mrs. Conroyal spread out the map on her lap and stared wonderingly at it. "I can't see how all this jumble of crooked lines and letters can tell you anything."

"Why, it's easy, mother," and Thure bent eagerly over the map. "You see you start from Hangtown and go in a northeasterly direction to Humbug Canyon and Three Tree Mountain and Goose Neck Lake and the Devil's Slide to Lot's Canyon; and then up Lot's Canyon until you come to Crooked Arm Gulch, and then up Crooked Arm Gulch until you come to the Golden Elbow; and the cave, you see, is right in the point of the elbow," and Thure's finger rested excitedly on the black spot on the map marked "cave." "The cave is about five days from Hangtown, the miner said. We can go to the mines now, can't we, mother?"

"Hangtown! What a horrid name!" and Mrs. Conroyal shuddered. "But," and she started to her feet excitedly, "wasn't your father's last letter sent from Hangtown? I am sure it was," and she hurried to her writing desk, picked up a letter and glanced eagerly at its heading. "See! It was! Here is the name," and she pointed triumphantly to the letter.

"You see, it won't be difficult to find the Cave of Gold from the map, mother, not with dad's help. And, mother, we must start for the mines just as soon as we can get ready to go. You surely will let us go now!" and Thure caught hold of his mother's hand. "Say, yes, mother, now; because Bud and I want to start to-morrow morning, and there is much to be done before we go."

"My boy," and Mrs. Conroyal's face sobered, "you are all the man that the mines have left me. Husband, son, servants, all have gone to the mines, until now you and Bud are the only able-bodied men left on the rancho—and now the mines are calling you!"

"But, mother, think of what the finding of such a mine means to us all! And father and Mr. Randolph, if they knew about the Cave of Gold and the skin map, I am sure would want us to come; and Old Juan and Manuel and the boys can take care of the rancho; and, you know, if we find the Cave of Gold and get the gold, then all of us, father and the rest, will be back soon; and we will be rich; and

dad can build you the new house that you want and furnish it the way that you want it furnished; and Bud and I can go East and get the education that we need to fit us to do a man's work in the great new State of California that is bound to be made out of this country, now that it has become a part of the United States. It is yes, isn't it, mother? And we can start, can't we, to-morrow morning?" and Thure's arm went round his mother and he drew her appealingly to him.

For a minute or two Mrs. Conroyal did not answer. She was battling with her mother-love. She knew what this quest of the Cave of Gold might mean—hardships, dangers, even death for those she loved. But she was of pioneer stock, had often seen her dearest go forth to face the dangers of the unknown wilderness; and, at last, with something of Spartan-like fortitude, she turned to Thure.

"Yes, my son, you may go," she said. "You may go to your father and tell him all; and he will decide about the search for the Cave of Gold."

"Hurrah! We can go! Mother says I can go!" and Thure swung his free hand around his head.

"And mother says I can go! Hurrah for the gold-mines!" and Bud clapped his sister on the back, by way of letting off some of the surplus steam of his enthusiasm. "It will be great! And I'll bring you back a necklace of gold nuggets, sister mine. Now, we must be getting ready."

"But, first we all have a solemn duty to perform,"

Mrs. Conroyal said gravely. "We must give the dead miner decent burial, as we would wish our own dear ones buried, should they die amongst strangers. See that the grave is dug, my son; and notify all that the funeral will be held in the house-sala at the going down of the sun. Come, we will make ready the house for the funeral," and, followed by Mrs. Randolph and the two girls, she hurried from the room.

A half an hour later, all who were left on the rancho gathered in the sala to pay the last respects of the living, who soon must die, to the dead, who but a short time before lived. There was no minister, no priest to be had. Mrs. Conroyal read the church service for the dead over the body of the unfortunate miner; and then six of the oldest and strongest boys gently lifted the boards on which the corpse lay to their shoulders and, just as the rays of the setting sun redden the tops of the western mountains, bore the body slowly to its last resting place, beneath the outstretched arms of a sturdy oak, on the top of a little hillock, near the murmuring waters of a small stream that flowed close by the house.

That night was a busy night at the Conroyal rancho. Everything must be got ready for the going of Thure and Bud in the morning; and it was surprising how many things there were that needed doing. But, at length, long after midnight, everything was in readiness and the two boys entered their sleeping room for their last night's rest, for

they knew not how long, in the dear old home-house.

"I can hardly realize that we are to start for the mines in the morning," Thure said, as he quickly undressed and jumped into bed. "All that has happened to-day seems more like a dream than the reality; and I am almost afraid that I will wake up in the morning and find that I have been only dreaming."

"Well," declared Bud, "if it's only dreaming, I'm going to get into bed and dream some more as quick as I can; so, not meaning to be impolite, shut up and good night," and he settled himself down comfortably in the bed and closed his eyes. And, in five minutes, in spite of the feverish excitements of the day, the two tired boys were sound asleep.

CHAPTER V

OFF FOR THE GOLD-MINES

THE next morning when the sun rose, in all the golden glory of dawning day in beautiful California, above the tops of the eastern mountains and shone down into the Valley of the Sacramento, its rays fell on an interesting scene in front of the Conroyal house, where nearly all the men, women and children of the place had gathered about two heavily laden pack-horses, four saddled horses, and two boys, and two girls. The two boys were Thure and Bud, ready to start for the mines, the two girls were Iola and Ruth, who were to ride with the boys for an hour or so on their way, the four saddled horses were their riding horses, and the two pack-horses bore the outfits of the young miners, as well as sundry tokens of love and affection sent to the dear ones at the mines. The boys stood at their horses' heads, ready to mount. The very moment of departure had come.

"Well, I reckon we must be going now. Good-by, mother," and Thure turned for a last embrace in those dear arms, and then swung himself up into his saddle.

"God bless you, and protect you, and bring you

safe home, my son," and Mrs. Conroyal, trying in vain to keep back the tears from her eyes and the sobs from her voice, embraced and kissed Thure farewell and bravely saw him mount.

Bud tried very hard to control his feelings, but his voice choked a little and there were tears in his eyes, as he kissed his mother good-by and jumped into his saddle; and then, just to break the gloom that seemed to be gathering too thickly about the parting, he jerked off his hat, and, swinging it around his head, shouted: "Hurrah, for the gold-mines! Hurrah, we're off for the mines!"

And everybody shouted with him; and, in the midst of the shouting, the two boys, leading their pack-horses and with Iola and Ruth on their horses by their sides, rode out of the house-court and started across the valley toward the distant eastern mountains.

The search for the dead miner's Cave of Gold had begun.

Iola Conroyal and Ruth Randolph were two very lively and high-spirited girls, just old enough to see all the romance and little of the rough reality and danger of such a quest as their two brothers had begun. The wonderful tale of the dying miner, with its Cave of Gold, its rough-drawn map and its big gold nugget, had appealed very strongly to their vivid and romantic imaginations; and the starting of Thure and Bud in search of this marvelous cave had surrounded them, in their eyes, with some-

thing of the glamour that gilds the heroes of romance. They envied them their quest; they would have gone joyfully with them, if they could; and now, as they rode along by their sides in the cool morning air, they could think or talk of little else than this wonderful quest and of what would happen, if the boys should really and truly find that marvelous Cave of Gold.

"Will you—will you promise to give me the first gold nugget you pick up in this wonderful cave?" Ruth said, after they had been riding and talking for some little while, glancing up a bit shyly into Thure's face. "I will have a breastpin made out of it and always wear it in remembrance of that great event—and—and of you," she added in a lower voice, her face flushing a little.

"Sure I will! I—that is exactly what I had planned to do anyhow," Thure declared. "And I'll see that it is a big one, Ruth, the biggest that I can find. And the next nugget I pick up you shall have for a ring; and then I'll pick up a lot of little nuggets and make you a gold necklace out of them."

"That will be glorious," and Ruth's eyes shone. "And—and I shall prize them all very much. Oh, dear, I don't see why we girls were just born girls and not boys! I never wanted to do anything as much as I want to go with you and Bud, and help hunt for this Cave of Gold. I'd go anyway, if mother would let me."

"So would I," Iola declared, her dark eyes and cheeks glowing at the thought. "It is terrible to be just a girl, when there is anything like this to be done. We, at least Ruth and I, do not want to be put in a cage and fed, like canary birds. We want to do things, too; and we could do things, too, if folks would only let us."

"Hoity-toity!" laughed Thure. "I reckon God knew what He was about when He made you 'just girls'—just sisters, sweethearts, wives, mothers, the dearest words spoken in every language the world over; and, for one, I am powerful glad that He did make you 'just girls.'"

"So am I," Bud agreed, so emphatically that all laughed.

"But, it really does seem too bad that Iola and I have got to stay at home with our mothers, where nothing exciting ever happens," persisted Ruth, "while you two, just because you are boys, can go hunting caves of gold and have all sorts of wonderful adventures—not that I really and truly would like to be a boy," she added hastily and a little contradictorily. "Boys are so awkward and have such big feet and hands, and—and—"

"And are such good fellows to wait on girls," grinned Bud provokingly.

"Which shows girls' real superiority," smiled back Ruth.

"Well, if you are satisfied, what are you kicking for? You haven't heard Thure and me wishing

that we were girls, have you?" queried Bud triumphantly.

"Well, I should say not, not when you are off on a hunt like this anyhow!" Ruth rejoined. "Oh, but I do hope you will find that Cave of Gold! And come back covered with gold nuggets and glory!"

By this time our young friends had reached the foot of the ridge, on whose top it had been agreed they were to say farewell to one another; and the thought of the nearness of the parting was suddenly pressed home to each heart, and they rode to the top of the ridge without speaking a word. Here they pulled up their horses; and, for a moment, their eyes looked wistfully into one another's faces, while they sat silent in their saddles.

"Oh, come, let's have the agony over!" and Bud tried to make his voice sound cheery and unconcerned. "Good-by, Ruth," and, urging his horse up close to the side of his sister's horse, he leaned over, threw his arms around her neck and kissed her. Then he turned and quickly served Iola in the same way; and, striking spurs into his horse, started off, his pack-horse tugging at the rope behind him.

Thure hesitated a moment; and then, following Bud's example, quickly kissed Iola and Ruth good-by, and started after Bud.

"Don't forget that you have promised me the first gold nugget that you pick up in the cave!" called Ruth.

"Nor the gold necklace!" warned Iola.

Thure and Bud waved their hands and shouted in reply; but rode steadily on.

The two girls sat on their horses and watched them, until, with final shouts and the waving of their hats, they passed over the top of a distant ridge and vanished from sight. Then Iola and Ruth turned their horses homeward and rode silently down the other side of the ridge. They did not care to talk, even about the wonderful Cave of Gold, just then.

They had ridden something like a couple of miles on their way homeward and their tongues were just beginning to wag, girl-like, again, when both were considerably startled by a loud hallo, coming from behind. They turned quickly and saw two horsemen, who had just ridden out from behind a small grove of trees, some twenty rods back and to the right, and who were now riding toward them.

"I wonder who they can be!" exclaimed Ruth. "I am sure that I never saw them before; but I suppose we had better wait and find out what they want. They might be lost. They look like strangers to this part of the country," and she pulled up her horse.

"Yes," agreed Iola, halting her horse by the side of Ruth. "They are probably foreigners on their way to the mines; and we had better wait to see if we can be of any help to them."

In the holster that hung from the pommel of the

saddle of each girl there was a double-barreled pistol, loaded and ready for instant use; and it was not there for ornament. Both girls had been trained to use the rifle and the pistol; and never, since Iola's frightful experience with the Mexican desperado, Padilla, some three years before,¹ had either girl been permitted to ride, even a short distance from the house, without having one or both of these weapons with her. Consequently, trained and armed as they were, they saw nothing to fear in meeting the two strange horsemen, although they were alone in a little valley and out of sight and hearing of every other human being, so far as they knew.

The two horsemen came up on a slow gallop; and pulled up their horses a dozen feet from the girls.

"We asks your pardon, ladies," said the larger of the two men—a big red-headed man with a broken nose—as he awkwardly doffed his hat. "But, seein' you ridin' by, an' thinkin' you might be able tew give us sum information, we bein' strangers in this part of Californy, we made bold tew hallo tew you," and he paused, his bold eyes staring admiringly into the dark face of Iola.

"We will be very glad to help you, if we can," answered Iola, a bit shortly, for she did not like the looks of the big man with the broken nose. "What is it you would like to know?"

¹ For an account of this adventure, see *Fighting With Fremont*, the preceding book of this series.

"Wal," answered the man, glancing toward his companion, "me an' my pardner was tew meet a man over yonder by that big rock that sticks itself out of th' ground, like a nose on a man's face," and he pointed to a huge rock a mile or more away that shot up out of the level of the valley, not unlike the nose on a man's face. "He was tew git thar 'bout noon yisterday; an' we haven't seen hide nor ha'r of him yit; an', gittin' powerful tired of waitin' an' thinkin' you ladies might have seen him, we stops you tew ask."

"An' bein' a leetle afeared he might have come tew harm," the other horseman, a small man with a pock-marked face, here broke in, "seein' that he was a comin' from th' diggin's an' was supposed tew have considerable gold-dust with him, we makes bold tew stop you ladies tew ask about him, jest as my pardner says, thinkin' you might have seen him."

"What—what did he look like?" Iola asked anxiously, the moment the man paused; for her thoughts had gone instantly to the dead man they had buried last night, when he had spoken of the man they were looking for as being on his way back from the diggings.

"Wal, he won't exactly what you ladies would call a beauty," answered the big man, grinning, "seein' that he'd let his whiskers an' ha'r grow long an' scraggly all over his face an' head; but you'd a-knowed him, if you'd a-seen him, by a peecoolyer

scar over his left eye, shaped sumthin' like a hoss-shoe, with th' ends of th' shoe pointin' t'ord th' corners of th' eye."

"Why," and Iola's face whitened, "he must have been the man our brothers, Thure and Bud, brought home with them yesterday afternoon! He had a scar on his forehead like that. Didn't you notice it?" and she turned to Ruth.

"Yes," Ruth answered, "and he was from the mines."

"Wal, now, that's good news," declared the big man, glancing out of the corners of his eyes at his companion. "We was afeared sum harm had come tew him. An' so he's restin' safe an' easy at your home. Now, whar might that be, if I may be so bold as tew ask?"

"But, he'd been robbed—murdered!" exclaimed Iola. "And it was his dead body that had been brought to our house. We buried him last night."

"Robbed! Murdered!" almost yelled the big man. "Do you hear that, Spike?" and he turned excitedly to his companion. "Sumone got him for his gold, jest as he was afeared they would. An' you say 'twas your brothers who found him, an' took th' body home with them, an' gave it decent burial. Now I call that decent, don't you, Spike?" and he glanced sharply at his companion.

"White an' decent," agreed Spike. "But," and his small snake-like eyes shifted swiftly from face to face of the two girls, as he spoke, "did he—did

he leave any message for his friends; or, was he dead when your brothers found him?"

"He lived only a little while," answered Iola. "He had been stabbed by one of the cowards, and he died before they could get him to the house. I don't think he left any message. I don't remember of hearing our brothers say anything about a message, do you?" and she turned to Ruth.

"No," replied Ruth. "He—he left no word for any friend. He only—" she stopped abruptly, and just in time; for, unthinkingly, she had been about to speak of the skin map and the Cave of Gold.

Both men started slightly at her words and abrupt stop and flashed swift glances into each other's eyes.

"Now, that's tew bad," declared the big man. "We sure thought he would leave a message for us, seein' that he knowed we was here a-waitin' for him. But, I reckon, we'd better ride on tew th' house with you ladies an' see them brothers of your'n personal. You see we wants tew make sart'in 'twas our friend that was robbed and murdered, besides he might have left sum word for Spike an' me, an' your brothers not have mentioned it, bein' naturally excited-like over th' robbery an' murder."

"But, you can't see them now!" exclaimed Iola, impulsively. "They left for the mines this very morning. Why, we parted from them not more than an hour ago."

Both men started violently at this news, and again the swift suspicious glances flashed from eyes

to eyes, and an ugly threatening look came into their faces.

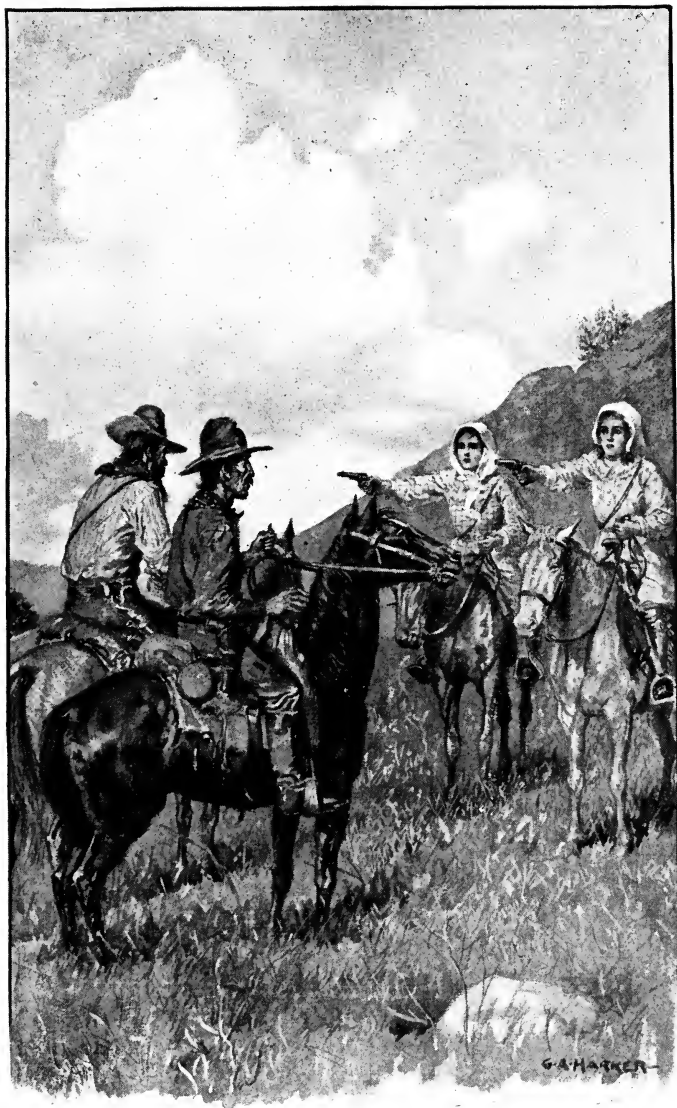
"Gone tew th' mines! An' started sudden, this very mornin'!" exclaimed Spike excitedly. "Did—did th' old miner say an'thing 'bout whar he found his gold afore he died?" and his beady black eyes glowed angrily into the faces of the two girls. "We're his friends, an' have a right tew know, an' we want tew know, an' we're goin' tew know," and he urged his horse nearer to the girls.

Both girls were badly frightened by this sudden and unexpected change in the two men; for there was no mistaking the ugly and dangerous look on their faces; but neither girl lost her head.

"You will not come a step closer than you now are," and the white hand of Iola flashed to the pistol in her holster; and Spike, to his evident horror, suddenly found himself looking straight down into two little round holes that seemed to his startled eyes as big as the mouths of cannons.

"And you, too, stay right where you are," and Ruth's pistol suddenly turned the big man with a broken nose into a wildly staring equestrian statue. "We two girls are not going to take any chances with you two men; and—and now that we have given you all the information that we have for you, you can turn your horses around and ride back the way you came."

The faces of both girls had suddenly grown as white as milk; for, almost at the same moment, each



"YOU CAN TURN YOUR HORSES AROUND AND RIDE BACK THE WAY
YOU CAME."

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had remembered that the dying miner had described his two murderers as a big red-headed man with a broken nose and a small man with a pock-marked face—and they were now looking straight into the faces of two such men. But the hands that held the pistols did not tremble; and there was no mistaking the look in the shining eyes back of the little round holes. They would shoot; and, if they shot, they would not miss; and it did not take the two men two seconds to discover these facts.

“Oh, come, this ain’t no hold up game, is it, ladies?” and the big man tried to look as if he considered the whole affair a huge joke; but he was very careful not to make a threatening move; and he kept his eyes fixed on the two little round holes of Ruth’s pistol, in a horrible staring way that Ruth never forgot.

“No,” Ruth answered shortly. “It is not a hold up; and there is going to be no hold up in this case,” she added significantly; “so just turn your horses around and gallop back the way you came; and be very careful not to let your hands go near your belts or to look back while doing it,” she warned.

“Oh, say, now,” began the small man. “This ain’t hospital-like. We ain’t meanin’ you ladies no harm. We—”

“Drop the talk and turn your horses around and get,” Iola commanded so imperatively, so threateningly that both men, in a sudden panic of fear—like nearly all rascals they were cowards and those

two pistols in those two girlish hands might go off at any instant—whirled their horses around and galloped off, while a bullet from one of the barrels of Iola's pistol, whistling between their heads, added to their panic and speed.

"Do you," and Ruth turned her white face to Iola, the moment the two men were at a safe distance, "do you really think they were the two men who murdered the miner?"

"Yes," answered Iola, as she began reloading her pistol, with hands that trembled now so that she could hardly pour the powder into the barrel. "I am sure they were. Ugh! But what a dreadful fright they gave me! I felt certain they were going to murder us, when they started toward us."

"And—and do you suppose they were trying to find out about that skin map and the Cave of Gold?" and Ruth's face again began whitening.

"Yes, that is it!" and Iola started. "That was what made them so angry and ugly, when we told them that Thure and Bud had already started for the mines. They at once suspicioned that the boys had the map and that they had started out to find the Cave of Gold. Oh, Ruth," and a look of horror came into Iola's face, "do you suppose they will start on the trail of Thure and Bud and try to get the map from them? Why, they might murder them!"

"That is exactly what I am afraid they will do," declared Ruth, her own face reflecting the horror in

Iola's face. "But you may be sure that two cowards like them will never get the best of our brothers, unless they do it in some sneaking underhanded way; and the boys have been warned to look out for them. It won't take Thure and Bud as long to discover who they are, as it did us. The instant they see that broken nose and pock-marked face, they will be on their guard. But I do wish we had said nothing about the boys starting for the mines. Anyhow that is about all the information they did get from us that will do them any good, thank goodness! And they will have a mighty hard time finding and following their trail, unless they are old hunters and trappers; and they did not look as if they were. Anyhow it can't be helped now; and the best thing that we can do is to get back home as quickly as we can."

"I don't think we had better say anything to our mothers about meeting the two men," Iola said, as with a final look in the direction of the two horsemen, who were still galloping up the valley, they turned their horses homeward. "It wouldn't do any good to tell them and they'd worry a lot."

"You're right. Mum's the word," agreed Ruth; and then both girls struck their horses sharply and started on a swift gallop for the Conroyal rancho, where we must leave them for the present and return to Thure and Bud.

CHAPTER VI

THE SIGN OF THE TWO RED THUMBS

AT the date of the happenings here recorded, 1849, the greater part of California was still an unbroken wilderness, inhabited only by scattered tribes of Indians and the wild beasts. For some three hundred years the Spaniards and the Mexicans had occupied a few choice spots along the coast, with now and then an isolated ranchero in the great interior valleys of the Sacramento and the San Joaquin Rivers. Then, in 1846, had come the War with Mexico and the Conquest of California by the Americans, swiftly followed by the discovery of gold in 1848 and the great inflow of gold-seekers from all parts of the world of 1849 and later, who, of course, all rushed pell-mell to the gold regions, leaving the rest of California more thinly populated than ever. Indeed, in 1849, all California, except the gold regions, was practically deserted; and, since the gold regions were located in what had been, a few weeks before, a mountainous wilderness, nearly everybody in California was living in the wilderness, and, necessarily, living under primitive wilderness conditions—a wild, free, independent sort of a life

that quickly brought to the surface the real character of each individual.

Such, then, was the California of 1849, the California of Thure and Bud; and such were the conditions of the life, the wild romantic life of the wilderness mining camps, toward which we left our young friends hastening, their unwilling pack-horses pulling and tugging on the ropes which were dragging them away from the home-pastures, when we rode a little way on the homeward journey with Iola and Ruth.

Now, to return to Thure and Bud.

The Conroyal rancho was situated in the Lower Sacramento Valley, some two-days' journey from Sutter's Fort, near which the City of Sacramento on the Sacramento River had sprung into a sudden and marvelous existence; and, as Sacramento City was then the final rendezvous of all those bound for the mines, some forty miles in the wilderness of mountains to the east, Thure and Bud, naturally, had headed straight for this town, intending, when there, to find someone going to Hangtown, with whom they might journey to this mining camp, where they hoped to find their fathers and their friends. Both boys were well acquainted with the trail to Sutter's Fort, having been there frequently with their fathers; and, since Sacramento City was only a couple of miles or so from Sutter's Fort, they would have no difficulty in finding their way thither. The trail, for the greater part of the distance, ran

through beautiful valleys and over low-lying hills, where nature still reigned unfretted by man and where a human being was seldom seen, consequently Thure and Bud expected to have a lonely ride to Sacramento City.

For some little while after the departure of the two girls neither boy spoke. Somehow they did not feel like talking, not even about the wonderful Cave of Gold, nor the skin map, nor the death of the old miner. They were thinking of home and the dear ones from whom they had parted for they knew not how long; and, when boys are thinking deeply of such things, they do not like talking. But, gloom and sadness cannot long conquer the spirits of any normal boy; and, at the end of an hour's riding they were their own lively and talkative selves again.

"I wonder if we can make our old camping-ground to-night?" Thure questioned doubtfully, as they came to a halt, a little before noon, on the top of a steep ridge to give their horses a short rest. "If I remember right, this ridge is not nearly half-way to the place where dad and I always camped when we went to Sutter's Fort; and it must be nearly noon now," and he glanced upward at the sun, which was fast nearing the zenith. "Say, but these old pack-horses are as slow as oxen. I wonder if we can't do something to hurry them up?"

"We've got to make the old camping-ground to-night, if it takes us till midnight," Bud answered emphatically. "That is, we've got to, if we expect

to get to Sacramento City to-morrow; and that's where I, for one, expect to be sometime to-morrow night. I reckon, we'll have to drive them pack-horses in front of us and use the whip a little."

"A bully idea," Thure agreed. "I wonder why we did not think of it before. Here, you old slow-poke, get up!" and, whirling his horse around, he suddenly rode up behind his pack-horse and gave that animal a quick blow with his whip.

The scheme worked splendidly; and the two boys were soon on their way again and moving at a considerably increased speed. But, notwithstanding their accelerated motion, it was not until some three hours after sunset that the two tired boys and the four tired horses reached the old camping-grounds, where there was an abundance of water for themselves and horses and fuel for the camp-fire.

"Well, I swun I am tired!" Thure exclaimed, as he threw himself down with a sigh of satisfaction on his blanket before the camp-fire, when, at last, the horses had been unsaddled and unbridled and unpacked and picketed where they could feed on the rich grass, and the two boys had eaten their rude meal of broiled venison—they had shot a young deer on their way—and homemade bread, washed down by a huge tin cup full of coffee of their own brewing.

"I reckon you are not the only tired boy in this camp to-night," and Bud spread out his blanket on the ground by the side of Thure's and stretched himself out on it. "Every bone and muscle in my

body has been just a-teasing me for the last two hours to let up and give them a rest. Well, we got here anyhow; and I guess we can now make Sacramento City all right to-morrow night. Say," and he sat up on his blanket with a jerk at the thought that had suddenly come to him, "do you suppose those two villains, who robbed and killed the old miner, have found out that we have the skin map that they committed murder in vain to get? If they have, I reckon we'll have to be on the lookout for them good and sharp. Why, they might be on our trail even now!"

"You are right," and Thure sat up quickly. "But I can't see just how they could know that we have the map. They certainly didn't wait for introductions when we charged down upon them; and I don't believe they followed us home—they were too scart, the cowards! But, as Kit Carson says: 'The time to be cautious is before the Indians get your scalp—not afterwards.' I reckon that means that we've got to keep guard to-night; and I don't believe I ever felt more sleepy," and Thure sighed. "But, if Brokennose and Pockface should happen to be on our trail, they couldn't ask for anything better than to get us two here alone and asleep to-night. They sure would have the skin map in the morning, and, probably, our horses and supplies, and, possibly, our lives. Say, but I just would like to meet them two cowards when I am awake!" and Thure's eyes glinted wrathfully.

"Well, I should not be surprised if we had that pleasure before long," and Bud's face hardened. "If the old miner told them of the Cave of Gold and the skin map, and he said he did, they sure will be on the lookout for the party with the map; and it wouldn't take much inquiring for them to find out that it was us that brought the dead miner home; and then, I reckon, it won't take them two minutes to guess what started us so sudden-like for the mines. I sure hope they won't find us until we get to our dads and Rex and Dill and Hammer Jones. I'd feel safe enough then. You see, we are guarding not only our lives, but also the Cave of Gold; and the finding of that cave means a lot to all of us."

"It sure does," Thure agreed. "Luck has been against both of our dads lately; and, well, we've just got to find that Cave of Gold; and we are going to find it, in spite of all the broken noses and pock-marked faces in the world. But, it won't do to sit here talking all night. We must get all the sleep we can. Who will stand guard first?"

"I will," Bud answered, picking up his rifle and rising; "so get into your blanket and asleep as quick as you can. It must be almost midnight now."

"All right," and Thure began rolling himself up in his blanket. "Wake me in about two hours, and I'll stand guard the rest of the night. We want to be on our way as soon as it is light enough to see. Good night," and in five minutes Thure was as dead to his surroundings as the log near which he lay.

Bud picked up his blanket and moved off into the dark shadows of the low-hanging branches of an evergreen oak and out of the light of the camp-fire, where he could watch, seeing but unseen.

The night had grown dark and cool—all California nights are chilly; and Bud wrapped his blanket around him and, leaning up against the trunk of the tree, looked out into the darkness surrounding the lone camp-fire. In the distance a coyote was making the night hideous with his demoniacal howlings. From a near tree came the lonesome hoot of an owl. All else was still, save from all around came the mysterious sounds of the wilderness at night, suggestive of the low whisperings and talking of uneasy spirits.

But all this was commonplace to Bud. He had often spent the night out in the open, had often stood guard by a lonely camp-fire, when darkness was all around and only the weird voices of the night were heard; and he gave little thought to these things. He was very tired and very sleepy and it took about all the thought power he had to compel himself to stay awake.

An hour past. There had not been a suspicious sound nor movement; and Bud began to feel more secure, began to relax some of his vigilance, began to close his eyes now and then for a brief moment, began to lean more comfortably against the trunk of the tree—then, suddenly, he straightened himself up with a jerk, his eyes wide open, his cocked rifle

held ready for instant use. Sure he had heard a sound, a sound that did not belong to the night, a thud like the fall of some heavy body on soft ground, and coming from the direction of the camp-fire! For a moment he stared, tense with excitement, toward the camp-fire, now glowing dully; but he saw nothing unusual, heard nothing unusual. Thure still lay by the side of the log, his form showing faintly in the dull light. The horses were grazing quietly—he could just distinguish their forms through the darkness. They showed no alarm.

“Queer! I certainly heard something fall; and right near! Well, I reckon I had better make sure that everything is all right with Thure,” and Bud very cautiously stepped out from the shadows of the tree and, moving softly, crept up to where Thure lay. His deep regular breathing told him that he was sound asleep and that all was well with him.

“Must have been dreaming,” he muttered in disgust, and returned to his station under the tree; but he did not close his eyes again.

There were no other suspicious sounds during the remainder of his watch, nor during the watch of Thure; and the dawning of morning found both boys and all their belongings safe and sound.

“Did you see or hear anything suspicious during your watch?” was Bud’s first query, when Thure awoke him the next morning.

“No. Why?” answered Thure. “Did you?”

"Well, I—I don't know," and Bud jumped to his feet and began looking sharply around over the ground near the camp-fire.

Suddenly he uttered an exclamation and, bending quickly down, picked up a large flat stone that was lying between the log, near which Thure had slept, and the camp-fire.

"I—I don't remember of seeing this stone here last night," and he turned it over curiously; and then uttered another exclamation that brought Thure to his side on the jump.

The stone was flat, some three inches thick, nearly round, and, possibly, a foot in diameter. One side was nearly white and smooth; and the astonished eyes of the boys read, rudely written on this side, evidently with a piece of charred coal, these ominous words:

LEAVE THE MAP TO THE MINERS CAVE
UNDER THIS STON NEAR YOUR CAMP
FIRE WHEN YOU BRAKE CAMP IN THE
MORNING AND NEVER TELL NOBODY
WHAT THE MINER TOLD YOU ABOUT
THE CAVE—OR WELL GIT YOU THE
SAME AS WE GOT THE MINER—LIFE IS
WURTH MOREN GOLD AND YOULL
NEVER LIVE TO GIT THE GOLD.

Under these words were the red prints of two thumbs—one the mark of a huge thumb and the other the mark of a much smaller thumb—as if their owners had covered their thumbs with blood and

then pressed them against the stone, in lieu of signatures.

For a full two minutes the two boys stood staring at these words, their faces whitening and their eyes widening.

"How—how did this get here?" Thure was the first to speak.

For answer Bud leaped to the log, by the side of which Thure had slept, and, bending over it, looked closely at the ground on the other side.

"Right from behind this log!" he exclaimed, after a moment's scrutiny of the ground. "The fellow that threw that stone crept up behind this log and then got up on his knees and tossed the rock to where we found it. You can still see the prints of his knees and toes in the ground. I thought I heard a sound like the fall of something heavy during my watch; but I was half asleep when I heard it," and Bud's face flushed a little; "and when I couldn't see anything suspicious or find anything suspicious or hear any more suspicious sounds, I concluded I had only fancied I had heard the sound. But that is sure no fancy," and his eyes glared at the stone, which Thure still held.

"And I was sound asleep right on the other side of that log at that very moment!" and Thure's weather-bronzed face whitened a little. "No more logs for bedfellows for me!"

"Yes, and he must have been lying right on the other side of that log, when I bent over you to see

if you were all right," added Bud. "If I'd been only smart enough to look, it might have saved us from a lot of trouble," and Bud's lips tightened grimly.

"Better as it is," Thure declared. "Now, we've had our warning and nobody hurt; but, if you had discovered the fellow behind the log, they'd have got you, sure, and, probably, me, too. Both were doubtless on hand; and would have shot you before you could have done anything, if you had discovered one of them. Now, I reckon, if they had found the camp unguarded, they were intending to have a try for the map then and there—and they would have got it! Well, what do you think about doing as they ask, and leaving the map under the stone? It seems from what that stone says—"

"What!" and Bud turned in astonishment to Thure. "Give up that map to a couple of the biggest cowards and cut-throats in California? I'd sooner give them every drop of blood in my body. I—"

"Well, you need not get so rambunctuous over it," laughed Thure. "But," and his face sobered, "I reckon that that there is no idle threat," and he pointed to the flat stone, which now lay on the ground at his feet; "and I fancy the sooner we get to our dads the better it will be for us. Not that I'd be afraid of those two skunks," he added hastily, "if they'd come out in the open, where one could see them; but I do not care for any more creeping upon a fellow in the dark, when he's asleep," and he

glanced shudderingly toward the log. "But, there is no use of talking any more about it. Let's get busy. We must make Sacramento City to-night sure."

In a very short time breakfast was eaten, the horses saddled and bridled and packed, and the two boys ready to mount and to start on their way again.

"Now, for our answer to that there message," and Thure picked up the flat stone and dropped it into the camp-fire. "I reckon that will tell them what we think of their threat; and that we're too old to be scart like little school boys," and he sprang on the back of his horse. "Now for Sacramento City!" and the two boys, with watchful eyes glancing all around them, resumed their lonely journey toward the new city on the Sacramento.

CHAPTER VII

CAUGHT IN THE FLOOD

IN July, 1849, the tide of gold-seekers had not yet set in at its greatest flow. It was too early in the year for the thousands of emigrants coming across the plains and the mountains to the east or for those journeying by ship from the more distant parts of the world to have reached the Eldorado of their golden hopes; but from every inhabited part of California and the region to the north, from Mexico and the Pacific coast southward and from the nearer islands of the Pacific a constant stream of gold-seekers had been flowing into the gold regions for nearly a year. Those coming by ship landed at San Francisco; and from there reëmbarked in smaller boats and were carried up the Sacramento River to Sacramento City, the nearest point to the mines reached by boat, or made the journey overland on horseback, or with mule- or horse- or oxen-drawn wagons, or even on foot. Many of the Mexicans and a few of the South Americans came overland, while nearly all of those coming from Oregon territory, whither many emigrants had gone from the States during the past few years, made the journey southward to Sacramento City the same way

they had crossed the great plains and the mountains, when they had sought new homes in the Great Northwest a few years before—that is, by way of the prairie-schooner, afoot and on horseback, traveling in small companies for mutual protection.

All of these different streams of inflowing gold-seekers were too far south for Thure and Bud to strike until they were nearly to Sacramento City, except that from Oregon, flowing from the north; and they hardly expected to find this stream still flowing, since those regions were supposed to have been already drained of all their gold-seeking inhabitants. But, hardly had they ridden an hour on their way that morning, when, on coming to the top of a low ridge of hills and looking down into the valley beyond, they saw half a dozen white-topped wagons, accompanied by a number of men, some on horseback and some afoot, a couple of miles ahead of them and about to pass over another ridge of hills.

“Hurrah!” yelled Thure, at sight of the wagons and the men. “I’ll bet a coon skin that they are bound for Sacramento City and the gold-diggings, too. Come, let’s hurry up our horses and see if we can’t overtake them. I’ll feel a lot safer when we’re in with that crowd,” and his keen eyes glanced swiftly over the valley in front of them. “There are too many places along this trail, where them skunks could hide and shoot us without our getting a shot back at them, to suit me. But they will hardly venture to take a shot at us, while we are with a

crowd of armed men like that. Hurrah! Come on!" and, striking his pack-horse with his whip, Thure hurried on down the hill.

A couple of hours later the two boys overtook the slower-moving train of wagons; and were given a hearty welcome by the gaunt, roughly dressed and rougher-looking men, who, as they had surmised, were bound for the gold-mines.

Thure, as they joined the little company of prospective miners, turned and looked backward, just in time to see two horsemen appear on the brow of a distant hill, halt their horses and sit staring in their direction for a couple of minutes; and then, wheeling their horses about disappear down the other side of the hill.

"Queer!" thought Thure. "I should think they'd be only too glad to join us, unless," and his heart gave a jump at the thought, "unless they were Brokennose and Pockface following on our trail! I wonder—"

But here the men of the wagon-train, gathering excitedly about him and all eagerly asking questions, drove all further thoughts of the two solitary horsemen out of his head.

There were fifteen men, two women, and three children—a girl of fourteen and two boys thirteen years old—in the company; and all had come from the great wilderness to the north, whither they had gone from the States some three years before. They had been traveling for many days southward,

through a wilderness inhabited only by wild beasts and Indians, without seeing a human being, except a few Indians, although they had passed a number of deserted ranchos on their way down the Sacramento Valley, until Thure and Bud rode into their midst. All the men were armed with long-barreled rifles, huge knives, and some of them, in addition, carried a pistol or a revolver. They were dressed for the most part in deerskins and their hair and beards had grown so long, that only their bright eyes and bronzed noses and gleaming white teeth, when they smiled or opened their mouths, were visible. All the other features of their faces were hidden behind matted locks of hair. The faces of the women and the children had been browned by the sun, until they were nearly of the color of Indians, and their clothing was soiled and worn; but all were clear-eyed and looked as if they did not know what a bodily ache or pain was.

Thure and Bud were too familiar with this type of wilderness manhood to be worried in the least over their rough looks and dress. They knew something of the real men that usually dwelt within these rough exteriors—the men who hewed the way for civilization through the wilderness, the men of the rifle, the trap, and the ax, strong and sturdy and as gnarled and knotted as the oaks of their own forests, yet as true to a friend or to the right as they saw it, as the balls in their rifles were to their sights—and neither boy hesitated an instant to accept their in-

vation to "jog along" with them to Sacramento City.

For a few minutes the whole company halted and crowded excitedly around Thure and Bud. They had heard no news of the world outside of their little company for many days; and they were especially anxious to hear the latest news from the diggings.

"Sure th' gold ain't petered out yit?" queried one of the men anxiously.

"No," answered Thure, smiling. "According to dad's last letter they were discovering new diggings almost every day and all the old diggings were still panning out well. Why, he wrote that the fellow who had the claim right next to his claim had found a pocket the day before, out of which he had taken in one day one thousand dollars' worth of gold nuggets!"

"Say, young man," and a great, huge-boned, lank man crowded eagerly up to Thure's side, "jest say them words over ag'in; an' say 'em loud, so that Sal can hear. She's bin callin' me a fool regular 'bout every hour since we started for th' diggin's. Says she'll eat all th' gold I find an' won't have no stumick-ake neither. Now, listen, Sal," and he turned excitedly to one of the two women, who stood together on the outskirts of the little crowd of men around Thure and Bud. "Jest listen tew what this boy's own dad rit home," and again he turned his eager eyes on Thure's face.

Thure laughed and repeated, in a louder voice, the story of the miner's good luck.

"Did you hear that, Sal?" and again the big man turned excitedly to the woman. "One Thousand Dollars' worth of gold nuggets picked right up out of a hole in th' ground in one day! Gosh, that's more gold than we ever seed in our lives! An' he found it all in one day! Good lord! in ten days he'd have Ten Thousand Dollars! An' in one hundred days he'd have One Hundred Thousand Dollars!" he almost shouted.

"Well, what if he did have one hundred thousand dollars! What good would that do you? That's what I'd like tew know, Tim Perkins? He'd have th' gold, not you, wouldn't he?" and the woman turned a thin care-worn face to her big husband.

"But," and the big fellow's eyes fairly shone with enthusiasm, "can't you see, Sal, that that proves that th' gold is thar; an', th' gold bein' thar, I stand as good a chance as anybody else of runnin' ontew a pocket like that. Good lord, a Thousand Dollars in One Day! Think of what that would mean tew us, Sal! Edication for th' boy an' gal, a comfortable home for us as long as we live! If we could only have sech luck! An' I've bin dreamin' of findin' gold almost every night since we hooked up an' started for th' diggin's!"

"An' your dreamin' always comes true!" replied Mrs. Perkins scornfully. "Well, I've only got this tew say, an', if I've sed it onct, I've sed it a hundred

times, this is our last wild-goose chasin' trip. You'll settle down for keeps, th' next time you settle down, Tim Perkins, gold or no gold; or you'll do your chasin' alone," and she turned and climbed back into one of the wagons, not at all moved by her big husband's enthusiasm.

"Sal's some downhearted," the big fellow explained to Thure, "'cause things ain't turned out for us like we expected since comin' tew Oregon. But," and his face lighted up again, "jest wait till I make my strike in th' diggin's an' nuthin' 'll be tew good for her an' th' yunks."

"Do you reckon we can make Sacramento City tew-night?" here broke in one of the men anxiously. "We was a calculatin' that we might."

"Yes," answered Thure, "if you are willing to travel late; but you'll have to hustle to do it."

"Then we'll hustle," declared the man, who appeared to be the captain of the little company. "Everybody who wants tew git to Sacramento City tew-night git a-goin'," he shouted. "Th' gold stories'll keep till we git thar," and he hurried away to his own wagon, which was in the van; and soon, with much loud shouting and the cracking of the long lashes of whips, the little train of wagons was again in motion.

Thure and Bud fell in at once by the side of the leader, who, learning that they were familiar with the trail to Sacramento City, had asked them to act as guides.

All the wagons were drawn by big raw-boned and long-legged mules; and the two boys soon found that they had to use their whips freely on their sturdy little pack-horses in order to hold their places in the train.

All day long they pressed steadily forward, as fast as mule legs could drag the heavy wagons; and, a little before night, they struck the northern trail from San Francisco to Sacramento City, now a well-traveled road. Here, for the first time, Thure and Bud began to get something of an idea of what the rush to the gold-mines was like. There were some twenty-five wagons, a hundred or more horsemen, and many men on foot in sight of their eyes, when their wagons swung around a small hill and on to the trail, now hardened into a road by the thousands of wheels and hoofs that had recently passed over it; and all were hurrying forward, as if they were fearful they would be too late to reap any of the golden harvest.

"Great buffaloes!" and Tim Perkins turned anxiously to Thure, by whose side he was riding, "dew you reckon all them folks are bound for the diggin's?"

"Yes," answered Thure. "Can't you see that everyone is armed with a pick and shovel and gold-pan? Why, even the men on foot are lugging picks and shovels and gold-pans on their backs!"

"An'," continued Tim, the anxious look on his face deepening, "dew you reckon they've bin a-tear-

in' over th' trail tew th' diggin's like this for long; or is this jest a stampede we have struck?"

"A ship has probably landed at San Francisco lately," Thure replied; "and these are some of the gold-seekers who came in it. But I don't think from what I have heard that what we are seeing is an unusual sight along this trail. They've been rushing to the mines like a herd of stampeding cattle for months."

"Gosh! I'm afeard they'll find all th' gold afore we git thar! If 'twon't for Sal an' th' yunks I'd hurry on ahead. Dang it, if I was only thar right now I might be discoverin' a pocket full of gold, like that miner aside your dad did, at this identical moment! Hi, thar, Jud," and he turned his eyes glowing with excitement to the face of the train-captain, "let's see if we can't git ahead of some of this tarnel crowd; or they'll be a-landin' on all the good spots afore we git thar."

"Now, jest keep a tight rein on your hosses, Perkins," grinned Jud Smith, the leader of the little company of Oregon gold-seekers; "an' rekerleck th' old sayin' 'th' more haste th' less speed.' But," and an uneasy look came into his own eyes, "it sure does look like all creation had started for th' diggin's. See, they're still a-comin' as far back as th' eyes can reach! I reckon we had better try an' hit up a leetle livelier gait. G'lang, thar, you long-eared reptels!" and the long lash of his whip hissed

through the air and cracked, like the report of a pistol, over the heads of his leading mules.

Indeed, it seemed to be impossible for even the sanest of men to mingle long with a crowd of hurrying gold-seekers and think of what they were hurrying for, and not catch the fever of unreasoning haste. The thought that they might be too late, that each moment they might be missing a golden opportunity by not being on the spot, seemed to obsess all minds; and the nearer they got to the gold-fields the greater became this excitement and hurry, until it degenerated into little more than a wild stampede of gold-mad men.

And no wonder! for the nearer they got to the mines the bigger the stories seemed to grow of the wonderful gold finds that were being made. Nay, more than this! They now sometimes actually saw the gold and actually met the men who had found it, as they were returning to the comforts and pleasures of civilization, actually burdened down with the weight of the precious metal they were carrying! And, what if all this gold should all be dug up before they got to the mines! The thought was enough to put the fever of haste into the blood of any man.

The knowledge of having the skin map and the thought of the Cave of Gold to which it pointed the way, did not keep Thure and Bud from feeling this excitement, this wild desire to hurry, as their

little company swung into line on the trail and rushed madly on with the rest. True the skin map and the gold nugget, still in the miner's buckskin bag, hung, safely hidden, under the armpit of Thure's left shoulder; but the old miner himself had found the Cave of Gold, and, if he had found it, why might not some other man find it? That was the disturbing thought that had troubled the two boys all along; and now, when they began to realize how great was the flood of gold-seekers constantly pouring into the mining regions and how their keen eyes would be searching everywhere, their anxiety to get to their fathers as quickly as possible grew apace, until they were almost as eager to reach the mines as was Tim Perkins himself; and, by a constant urging of their pack-horses, managed to keep their places with Jud Smith and his company.

However, in spite of all their hurrying, it was after nine o'clock at night and dark before they reached the west bank of the Sacramento River opposite Sacramento City. Here they found a hundred wagons and many animals and men ahead of them, waiting to be ferried across the river; and, to their very great disappointment, they were obliged to wait until the next morning before crossing over to Sacramento City.

"Well, we are within sight of Sacramento City anyhow," declared Thure, when Jud Smith returned from the ferry with the news that they would

be obliged to camp on that side of the river for the night; "and, I reckon, it is just as well that we don't cross over to-night. I'll feel just a little better entering a town like that in the clear light of day," and his eyes looked in astonishment and wonder across the dark waters of the river to where the myriad lights of Sacramento City shone along the opposite bank.

The last time Thure had stood where he was now standing, only a little over a year ago, and looked across the Sacramento River, not a sign of a human habitation was in sight where now shone the thousands of lights of a busy city!

"Isn't it a wonderful sight!" exclaimed Bud, as the two boys stood a little later on the river bank, staring, with fascinated eyes, across the water. "Looks more like a dream-city, or a scene in fairyland, than it does like a real town inhabited by real people."

And Bud was right. It was a marvelous sight that the two boys were looking at, a sight the like of which, probably, no human eye will ever look upon again.

Along the river bank for a mile or more and stretching back from the water's edge up the slope of the low-lying hills, glowed and sparkled a city of tents, pitched in the midst of a virgin forest of huge oak and sycamore trees. It is impossible for words to convey to the mind the mystic charm of this wonderful city of light, when seen by night across the dark waters of the river. Nearly all the houses

were but rude frames walled with canvas, or merely tents; and, in the darkness, the lights within transformed these into dwellings of solid light, that glowed in rows along the river front, their lights reflected in the water, and straggled in glowing rows of light up the hillsides and underneath the dark overhanging branches of great trees, while here and there through the general glow shone out brilliant points of light, the decoy-lamps of the gambling-houses and the saloons. And, for a background to all this, the shadowy darkness of the surrounding night!

Thure and Bud were very tired; but they stood for many minutes looking on this wondrous and fairylike scene, half expecting to see it all vanish instantly at the wave of some magician's wand, before they turned to prepare for the night. On their way back to camp and just as they were passing a large camp-fire, they met two horsemen riding down toward the ferry.

"No crossing to-night!" called out Thure.

The two horsemen turned their faces in their direction; and both boys started, for, by the light of the camp-fire, they saw that one of the men was large and the other was small and that the nose of the large man had been broken, and then the darkness hid their faces from their sight, as the two horsemen hurried on without uttering a word in reply.

CHAPTER VIII

ACCUSED OF MURDER

THERE were no laggards in the camp on the west side of the Sacramento River the next morning. Long before sun-up a line of wagons and animals and men stood waiting at the ferry, ready to be carried across the river; and among the first of these were our anxious young friends, Thure and Bud. They had pushed on ahead of their fellow travelers of the day before, the little company of Oregon gold-seekers, who had been delayed in getting into the line on account of their wagons, and were fortunate enough to get near the ferry; and, just as the first rays of the morning's sun looked down on the novel and interesting scene, they led their animals on board the ferry-boat.

The boat was jammed with men and wagons and horses and mules and oxen. The men were all talking excitedly of the mines, the animals were frightened and restless—indeed, all living beings seemed to breathe in excitement and restlessness and anxiety out of the very air, with every breath they drew into their bodies.

"Glory be!" commented Bud, as his eyes looked over the motley gathering of men that crowded

every available spot on the boat, "but this is a queer-looking lot of men to see in the wilds of California! Looks like every nation in the world was represented right here in this one boat load and sounds like the confusion of tongues at the tower of Babel. There sure has got to be a lot of gold, if everybody gets a share!" and his face clouded. "Say, but this boat is slow!" and he turned his impatient eyes toward the shore, where, in the garish light of day, the city of canvas seemed real enough, but not a whit less wonderful, only in an entirely different way, than had the magic city of light the night before.

A forest of masts grew from a multitude of boats strung along the river front, and stood out in striking contrast against the leaved branches of the trees on the shore. The boats were moored to strong trunks and huge sinewy roots; and the larger number of them turned out "to grass," that is, leased as shops and dwelling houses. Sign-boards and figure-heads from the boats were set up along the shore, facing the levee; and back of them, up the gentle slopes of the hills lying between the Sacramento and the American Rivers, for the town was built at the junction of these two rivers, ran the streets of this novel city, lined with their odd-looking canvas houses and tents. Great forest-trees, some of them six feet in diameter, towered here and there above the houses and the streets, their huge column-like trunks and outspreading

boughs, clothed with green leaves, adding the needed touch of romanticism to complete the unique picturesqueness of the scene. Everywhere was bustle and excitement. Men were hurrying in and out of the doors of the shops and of the saloons and up and down the streets. Drivers were shouting and cursing at their horses, mules, or oxen; whips were cracking; and wheels were rumbling and creaking. Parties of miners here and there, with loud shouts of farewell, were starting off for the mines, loaded down with pickaxes and shovels, with gold-pans and frying-pans, and other equipments of the rude camp-life they were preparing to live. Sun-up, everybody up, seemed to be the motto of all Sacramento City.

Into the midst of this wild hurly-burly Thure and Bud plunged directly from the ferry-boat. At first they hardly knew what to do with themselves and horses. Never had they been in a scene of such excitement and confusion before. It fairly made their heads whirl; but, boy-like, they enjoyed every bit of it, as, with their keen young eyes glancing in every direction, they rode, holding their frightened pack-horses close to their sides, slowly up what seemed to be the main street of the city.

"Say," and Bud pointed to a large sign on the front of one of the few frame buildings, which read "City Hotel," "that looks like a place to eat. Let's tie our horses outside and go in and get our breakfast. I'm as hungry as a bear; and—and—well we

can talk over what we had better do next while we are eating. Glory be, I did not suppose Sacramento City was like this!" and he grinned.

The boys had been in too much of a hurry to get across the river to stop to prepare their own breakfast that morning, consequently Thure at once welcomed Bud's suggestion; and, jumping off their horses, the two lads tied their animals to near-by trees and walked into the City Hotel, bravely trying to look and act as if they were accustomed to living at hotels all their lives, although, to tell the truth, neither boy had even seen a hotel before for ten years.

They found the dining-room and seats at one of the tables without much difficulty; and after some little study of the bill-of-fare, during which they forgot to look at the prices, they gave their order to the waiter—God save the mark! no, to the steward; for there the word "waiter," was never used, it not being considered a sufficiently respectable calling for a man who a few months before might have been a lawyer, a doctor, a merchant, or even a minister. The food was soon set before them; and, as they ate, they talked over the situation.

"The first thing for us to do," declared Thure, "is to find some miners bound for Hangtown, and then make arrangements to go with them; and the only way to do this is to start out and ask everyone who looks as if he was going to the diggings, if he is going to Hangtown, or knows of anyone who is.

I reckon it won't take us long to find someone; and, if possible, we want to get on our way to-day."

Bud promptly sanctioned this plan; and, accordingly, it was agreed that, as soon as they finished their breakfast, they would start out to find someone bound for Hangtown.

"I'll pay the bill," magnanimously announced Thure, when the last morsel of food and the last swallow of coffee had vanished down their throats, and he turned to the smiling steward.

The steward wrote for a minute or so on a little pad of paper; and then, tearing off a sheet, handed it to Thure. It was the bill for their breakfast and read:

4 fried eggs.....	\$6.00
1 leg of mutton (with potatoes).....	2.25
1 leg of veal (with potatoes).....	2.25
2 cups of coffee (with milk).....	1.50
Bread (with butter) for two.....	2.00
2 pieces of pie.....	1.50

Total.....\$15.50

"Great Moses!" and Thure stared in the utmost astonishment at the piece of paper he held in his hand, "does this mean that we are to pay Fifteen Dollars and a Half for what we have just eaten?"

"Yes," smiled the steward, who had evidently been a lawyer before he became a steward, "fifteen dollars and fifty cents is all. Eggs and butter came down a little to-day; and we always give our patrons

the benefit of a fall in prices at once. You will see that your bill is correct by glancing at the prices on the bill-of-fare."

Thure transferred his stare, for a moment, to the face of the smiling steward; and then, picking up the bill-of-fare, he saw that the prices were correct, and paid the bill.

"I see that you have already found your gold-mine," he remarked, as he handed the cashier the money.

"And without digging in mud and gravel for the gold," the cashier replied, with a grin and a wink. "But, there is not as much gold in it as you might think. Now, how much do you suppose those eggs cost me a dozen?" and he pointed to the egg item on the bill-of-fare.

"Never sold any," smiled back Thure. "We always gave them away."

"Huh! I'll take a car load at that price. Now, them identical eggs that you ate this morning cost me at the rate of Thirteen Dollars and Seventy-five cents a dozen, wholesale! I reckon you are new to the diggings, or you would know that prices on everything have gone soaring up like skyrocket," and the cashier, who happened also to be the proprietor, threw up both hands despairingly toward the ceiling. "Say, what do you suppose I have to pay the fellow who washes the dishes? Seventy-five Dollars a week and keep! And the cook, Mother of men! he gets One Hundred and Eighty-five Dol-

lars a week! Got to pay it, or they'll go to the diggings."

"Excuse me," broke in Bud, who at this moment suddenly thought that no one would be apt to know more about the goings and the comings of the miners, than the hotelkeeper, himself. "But, do you happen to know of any miners in town who are going to Hangtown? We expect to find our dads there; and want to get away from here as soon as we can."

"Now," and the broad forehead wrinkled, "let me think. Sure!" and the wrinkles vanished. "Yankee Tom and his company were to start for Hangtown this morning; and, I reckon, if you hustle, you can yet get to them before they start. You see—"

"Where'll we find them?" broke in Thure eagerly. He was too anxious to be off to care to listen longer to the talkative landlord.

"See that big sycamore over yonder?" and the landlord pointed through the open door to where a giant tree lifted its head far above its surroundings.

"Yes."

"Well, Yankee Tom's camp is under that tree. Just head for that tree, and you will sure hit his camp, if he is still there; but you'd better hustle," and the landlord turned to attend to other guests.

Thure and Bud at once hurried out to where they had left their horses; and were soon mounted and hastening toward the big tree. Their route, for a

short distance, lay through a very busy street, with shops of all kinds and innumerable gambling—and drinking-hells on both sides. Great crowds of men were hurrying in and out of these places; and the street was so jammed with wagons and horses and mules and oxen and men that Thure and Bud found considerable difficulty in making their way through it.

“No more hotel eating for me,” declared Thure, with a grimace, as they made their way as speedily as possible through this crowded street. “A Dollar and a Half for an Egg! But won’t mother’s eyes open when she hears that?”

“Well, eggs are not the only things that are high. Just look at that sign there,” and Bud pointed to a large sign in front of one of the stores, on which the storekeeper had recorded the day’s bargains. The sign read:

THE BEST AND THE CHEAPEST PLACE
TO BUY YOUR OUTFITS
A FEW OF TO-DAY’S SPECIAL BARGAINS
THAT CAN’T BE BEAT ANY-
WHERE IN THE CITY

Best flour ten pounds for only.....	\$15.00
Rice, five pounds for only.....	5.00
Potatoes, a heaped-up bushel, only..	35.00
Good butter only.....	2.00 per pound
Barley only.....	1.00 per quart
Best white beans only.....	6.50 “ “
Candles only.....	1.00 each.

Best Salaratus only.....	\$ 14.50 per pound
Hip boots, warranted waterproof..	100.00
Pair of pantaloons, good quality...	36.00
Sugar—good—only	2.00 per pound
Coffee, five pounds for.....	9.00
Good picks, shovels, tin-pans at only	57.00 each.

“Whew!” and Thure drew in a long breath, when he had finished reading the sign. “It’s lucky we brought our outfits along with us, or we’d be bankrupt before we could get out of Sacramento City. Well, those prices certainly prove that the gold is here. Nobody could live if it wasn’t. And, when you stop to think that most of the stuff has to be brought thousands of miles and then packed for some two hundred miles more into a roadless wilderness, the prices don’t look so high—Well, what’s the rumpus now?” and Thure whirled partly around on his horse to look back to where a huge red-headed man had suddenly jumped up on top of a barrel in front of one of the stores, and was yelling something, just what he could not understand, and pointing excitedly in his direction.

A sound, like a growl from the throats of a hundred angry wolves, went up from the surrounding crowd, and a great wave, headed by the red-headed man, rolled threateningly toward the two wondering boys.

“What—what can be the trouble?” and Bud turned an anxious face to Thure. “They look mad;

and they are coming straight toward us! What can have happened? Who are they after?" and he looked confusedly around.

"Pull them off their horses!"

"Hang them!"

"The murderers!"

The air was now filled with these and similar dreadful cries and men came running toward them from all directions; and, before the two boys could fairly realize what was happening, they found themselves the center of a seething crowd of excited and angry men, while a hundred armed hands were lifted threateningly toward them.

"God in heaven, they are after us!" and Thure, too utterly astounded for the moment to realize the terrible nature of their situation, stared wildly into the surrounding angry faces. "What—what—"

But, before he could put his stammering dumb-founded query, strong hands seized and jerked him roughly from his horse, while other hands at the same moment jerked Bud off his horse. One of the men who seized and pulled Thure from his horse was the big red-headed man, who had jumped up on top of the barrel and who had led the rush against the two boys. The moment Thure looked into his face he started back in horror. The man had a broken nose!

At this moment and before either boy had collected his startled wits sufficiently to even offer a protest or to demand what this rough laying on of

hands meant, a big man drove, like a sharpened wedge, through the crowd, and halted, with a hand tightly gripping the coat collar of each terrified lad.

"What is the trouble?" he demanded authoritatively. "What have the young men done?"

"The sheriff!" yelled someone in the crowd. "It's Turner, the sheriff!"

"Yes, it's Turner, the sheriff," and the man tightened his grips on Thure's and Bud's collars. "Hands off. They are my prisoners now," and he turned a bit impatiently to the men, whose hands still had hold of the boys. "Well, what have they done?"

"Murder!" "Murder!" yelled a dozen voices from the crowd.

"Why, they are little more than boys!" and the sheriff turned his eyes in astonished horror on Thure and Bud. "Who accuses them?"

"Me an' my pard do," and the big red-headed man with a broken nose, who had let go of Thure the moment the sheriff had him safely by the collar, stepped up in front of Turner. "We accuses them of murderin' an' robbin' John Stackpole, an old miner, who was on his way tew San Francisco from th' diggin's; an' what's more, we saw 'em do it with our own eyes; an' are ready tew swear tew th' same afore any judge an' jury. Ain't we Spike?" and he turned to a small man, with a pock-marked face, who was standing close to Bud.

"True as preachin'," declared the small man.

"With my own eyes I saw 'em knock th' miner off his hoss with their guns, an' then jump on him, an' run a knife through his heart, an' jerk off his gold-belt, an'—"

"You lie!" and the hard fist of Bud's sturdy right arm landed squarely on the chin of the man, with such force that he was knocked backward, senseless, into the arms of a man standing behind him. "You and Brokennose killed him yourselves. We—"

"Shut up!" and the sheriff whirled Bud violently around in front of him. "Now, young man, another move like that and I will put you in irons. Here, Dave," and he turned to a roughly dressed miner standing near, "just pull their teeth, while I hold them. They're beginning to look some rambunctuous."

And, indeed, Thure and Bud did look "rambunctuous"; for by now both boys were beginning to get an inkling of the game that was being played on them by the two scoundrels. But, what could they do? Everything had happened so suddenly and unexpectedly, that they were in the hands of the sheriff before either of them had recovered his wits sufficiently to even open his mouth in protest or defense.

"Quiet, quiet," cautioned the roughly dressed miner, whom the sheriff had summoned to his aid, in a low voice, as he swiftly pulled the boys' knives and pistols from their belts. "Don't let your tem-

pers git tew buckin'. You're a sight better off in th' hands of th' sheriff, who will see that you git a fair trial, than you would be in the hands of the mob, who sometimes string a feller up first an' try him afterwards."

Thure and Bud promptly saw the wisdom of this counsel and allowed the miner to disarm them without protest.

"Now, Dave, I'll make you my deputy until this little matter is settled. Bring along the animals and I'll see that these two young—" The sheriff paused and looked curiously into the faces of Thure and Bud. "I'll be hanged, if you look much like murderers!" he declared frankly. "Howsomever, I am not the judge; and you can't always tell whether or not a dog has got fleas by his looks."

"We are innocent, absolutely innocent," began Thure excitedly. "We did not kill the old miner. We—"

"Save your talk," broke in the sheriff good-naturedly, glancing sharply into the boy's face, "for the trial. I'll see that you get a fair trial; and that's all that I can do. Now, you two men that make this accusation of murder against the prisoners, come along," and he glanced keenly at the two men.

Brokennose still stood near Thure; and the one called Spike had recovered sufficiently from his contact with Bud's fist to stand glaring at Bud, with an ugly scowl on his pock-marked face.

"Where are you goin' tew take 'em?" he de-

manded. "This ain't no jail case. We wants them tried immejiate. Thar ain't no need of lawyers an' jedges tew mix things up. We seed 'em kill th' miner, an' are willin' tew swear tew it, an' that otter be enough tew have 'em danglin' by their necks inside of half an hour."

"They'll dangle, when they've been proven guilty, according to the laws of this city; and not before," answered the sheriff dryly. "We'd give a dog a fair trial in this town before we'd hang him. Come, you can tell your stories to the alcalde," and, still keeping a tight grip on the collars of Thure and Bud, he started down the street toward the office of the alcalde, before whom all criminal cases were tried, followed by Dave, the miner, with the horses of the boys, their two accusers, and the crowd, which had made no move to dispute the authority of the sheriff, although a little growling had been done. They knew that they would not have long to wait. California justice in those days in the mining towns and camps was sudden.

CHAPTER IX

THE TESTIMONY OF BILL UGGER

SACRAMENTO CITY at that date had a rude but effective government of its own. An alcalde and other city officers had been elected; and certain unwritten laws, for the protection of life and property, had been promulgated and were strictly enforced. Lynching, in the sense that we know it to-day, was almost unknown. There were no disorderly mobs, who, under the spurs of their own brutal passions, strung up their victims unheard and without even the semblance of a fair trial. Justice, if sudden, was usually careful to see that it was justice and not brutality that rendered the verdict. And yet, many of these early trials had the outward semblance of lynching-bees in the swift severity of their punishments. A murderer would be arrested, tried, convicted, and decently hanged, all before sundown of the same day. The mob spirit was there, but usually held in check by the sturdy manhood of the American miners, who had nearly all come from law abiding and law respecting communities.

This swift severity of Justice was, in a sense, compelled by the unusual, the almost unprecedented

conditions surrounding life in a city born suddenly in a wilderness. There were few locks and bars and bolts, or, even, doors, in Sacramento City at that time; and large sums in gold and great values in goods were often left exposed and almost unprotected. The thief, under such circumstances, had to be dealt with severely and promptly; or the property of no one would be safe. There were no regularly established courts in the city to try criminals, no written code of laws to dictate methods of procedure, no court officials to enforce mandates, and no safe jails in which to confine prisoners. Under such circumstances the people had to form their own courts, make their own laws, and see that they were enforced; or have no laws; and the criminal had to be dealt with summarily. The thief was sometimes whipped, or, even, cropped, that is his ears were cut off, and he was always driven from the city, and warned not to come back under penalty of death. The murderer, when proven guilty to the satisfaction of the people, was always hanged. No prisoners were held. They were proven guilty and sentence pronounced and executed at once; or they were set free.

Such was Sacramento City in 1849, the Sacramento City in which Thure and Bud now found themselves under arrest for the horrible crime of murder, the most serious crime that can be charged against a human being anywhere, but rendered especially serious in the present case by the peculiar

surrounding circumstances. In all the city, so far as either boy knew, they did not have a friend, or even an acquaintance, who could vouch for them—and yet, before the sun set that night, they must prove themselves innocent of the crime charged, or, in all human probability, be hanged!

The alcalde's office was small, only a few of the great crowd of men who had followed the sheriff and his prisoners could get inside of it; and, when the alcalde saw the size of the gathering outside of his office and learned the serious nature of the charge against the two boys, he at once ordered the "court" to be held under the big oak in the horse-market, where there would be room for all to see and hear how justice was dispensed. Accordingly all started at once for the horse-market, situated near the bottom of K Street, where an immense evergreen oak stood in the middle of the street, furnishing an agreeable shade for many feet around and a fittingly picturesque scene for the holding of such a trial as was about to take place.

The method of procedure, on arriving at the horse-market, was simple but effective. The alcalde took his station near the trunk of the great oak, and summoned the prisoners and their accusers before him, while the crowd gathered in a grim and stern-faced circle around this improvised courtroom.

"What is the crime the prisoners are charged with?" and the alcalde turned to the sheriff.

"Murder!" answered the sheriff briefly.

"Who makes the accusation?"

"Those two men standing there," and the sheriff indicated the big red-headed man with the broken nose and the small man with the pock-marked face, who now stood just behind the sheriff and his two prisoners.

"Stand forth by the side of the prisoners," commanded the alcalde.

The two men shuffled awkwardly forward and stood uneasily by the side of Thure and Bud, their eyes shifting restlessly from the face of the alcalde to the faces of the surrounding crowd.

For a couple or more minutes the alcalde studied the faces of the two boys and the faces of their two accusers in silence. Evidently he was endeavoring to form an opinion of the characters of the prisoners and their accusers; but, what that opinion was, his face did not betray.

"Why do you accuse these two young men of murder?" and the alcalde suddenly fixed his eyes upon the face of the man with a broken nose.

"Because I seen 'em do it," answered the man. "Me an' my pard, Spike, seen 'em do it. Ask him," and he turned to the small man, who stood close by his side.

"And you are both willing to make oath that you saw these two young men, who are little more than boys, commit the awful crime of murder?" the alcalde continued.

"Yes," promptly responded both men.

"Then, may God have mercy on your souls, if the accusations are false! What have you to say to the accusation? Guilty; or, not guilty?" and the alcalde turned abruptly to Thure and Bud.

"Not guilty," answered Thure, his face very white. "We—"

"That will do for the present," interrupted the alcalde. "Gentlemen, how shall the case be tried?" and he turned to the surrounding crowd of stern-faced men.

"Give 'em a jury, an' git a-goin'," called a rough voice impatiently.

"Do you wish a trial by jury?" and again the alcalde turned to Thure and Bud.

"Yes," answered both boys.

"The trial will be by jury," announced the alcalde. "I summon to act as this jury," and his eyes searched the circle of surrounding faces, as he slowly called out the names of twelve men, who, as their names were called, stepped forth and took their stations by the side of the alcalde and in front of the prisoners and their accusers.

When the twelve jurymen had been selected, all were solemnly sworn by the alcalde to render a true and just verdict, according to the evidence presented; and the trial of Thure and Bud for the murder of John Stackpole, the miner, was ready to begin.

During all this time Thure and Bud had been

doing some very serious and some very rapid thinking. At first the suddenness and the unexpectedness of the rush of men upon them in the busy street, followed so swiftly by their arrest and the dreadful accusations of the two men, whom they had every reason to believe had committed the crime themselves, had almost completely benumbed their faculties; but this condition of mind had lasted only a short time, and long before they reached the place of trial their minds were busy with the dreadful problem of how to prove themselves innocent of the crime charged, when two men were ready to swear that they saw them commit the crime, and when they did not have, could not have, a single witness who could swear to the truthfulness of their statements concerning the miner's death. No one but themselves had seen him die; and, so far as they knew, no one but themselves and their accusers knew the cause of his death. If they only had time to send home— But, even if they had witnesses from home, what could they prove? Only that the two boys had brought the dead miner home and had buried him; and that would be no proof that they had not killed him and invented the story of the two robbers.

True, on their side, they could accuse the two men of committing the murder themselves; but they had no positive proofs that they were guilty of the crime, only the description of his assailants given them by the dying miner. There might be other

men with broken noses and pock-marked faces. All that they could swear to of their own knowledge was that one of the men they had seen murdering the old miner was larger than the other. They had not got near enough to the murderers to be able to recognize them again, even if they should see them, except by the description given by the murdered man. And for them to accuse the two men, who had caused their arrest, of the murder, in itself would look suspicious to those who did not know the real facts and would have a tendency to make them doubt their whole story of the death of the miner.

Then there was another matter that troubled the two boys greatly. Why had the two men accused them thus publicly of the murder of the miner? Why had they run this risk of turning suspicion against themselves? They must feel very certain that the "evidence" they would produce would convict; or, they never would have dared to have chanced accusing them of the crime; for their acquittal would be almost sure to turn suspicion in their own direction. True, there was the skin map, and, possibly, the accusation was some scheme to get the map into their possession; but, how could their hanging bring this about? If they were hanged, the map and its meaning would be almost sure to be made public; and then every man in Sacramento City would have as good a chance of finding the Cave of Gold as would the two scoun-

drels themselves, a condition of things that both boys felt quite sure the two men were exceedingly anxious to avoid, and the map itself would be almost certain to be kept from them.

Then, again, the possession of the skin map itself was the cause of the gravest anxiety and dread. If they confessed to its possession it would reveal to all the secret of the Cave of Gold, something that they were almost ready to give their lives to prevent, and would not help their case in the least. Indeed, under the circumstances it would, probably, be considered the strongest possible circumstantial evidence of their guilt.

But, what if the alcalde should order them searched and the map be found? Or, what if the two men, becoming desperate, should ask that they be searched, to see if anything that belonged to the miner could be found in their possession, and the buckskin bag and the gold nugget and the skin map should all be discovered in their place of concealment under Thure's left shoulder?

When the two horns of a dilemma are both equally long and sharp, how, then, can the peril be avoided?

Indeed, the longer and the closer Thure and Bud looked at their situation, the more dreadful and impossible of remedy it appeared. How could they prove their innocence, when they did not have a single witness to appear in their defense? How could their youth and inexperience, friendless and

alone, hope to combat successfully with the cunning and the experience of these two unprincipled men, who would stop at nothing to accomplish their ends? But, they were not the kind of boys to give up a fight for life, as long as they could strike back; and the more difficult their situation appeared, the more grimly determined they became to win out somehow, or, at least, to die fighting.

"Not a word of the skin map and the Cave of Gold," hastily warned Thure in a whisper to Bud, as the alcalde, having completed the tale of the jury, again turned to them. "Tell everything just as it happened, but that. The telling of that would not help us a bit; and, if it were known that we had a map and a gold nugget that had belonged to the miner, it would look suspicious and might hurt us a lot; and we don't want to give away the Cave of Gold, not if we can help it."

"Right," whispered back Bud. "It's got to be our word against the word of those two cowardly villains, I reckon," and he glared furiously in the direction of the two men. "We've just got to beat them some way," and his young face grew grim and stern.

By this time the jurymen had all seated themselves comfortably on the ground on both sides of the alcalde, and were ready to hear the testimony.

"You may step forward and be sworn," and the alcalde's eyes signaled out the big man with a broken nose.

The man stepped up in front of the alcalde, who sat on a stump, with a barrel standing on end in front of him and an old worn Bible lying on top of the barrel.

"Hold up your right hand," commanded the alcalde, his keen eyes fixing themselves sternly on the red, brutal face; "and repeat the oath after me."

The man's right hand went up with a sort of spasmodic jerk.

"I do solemnly swear," began the alcalde slowly, "that the testimony I am about to give in the case now before the court, shall be the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth; and may God eternally damn my soul, if I knowingly utter a false word."

Hesitatingly and with a whitening face, the man slowly repeated this oath.

"Kiss the Bible," commanded the alcalde; "and may God blister the lips that have touched His holy book, if they suffer a false word to pass between them."

The man hesitated a moment: and then, at a muttered objurgation from his companion, he bent and hastily pressed his lips against the cover of the holy book.

"What is your name and business?" In this rude and informal court the alcalde not only acted as judge, but also examined all witnesses.

"William Ugger, Bill Ugger, for short," answered the man, his eyes shifting restlessly from

face to face as he spoke. "Me an' my pard are bound for th' diggin's."

"Now, remembering that you have sworn to speak nothing but the truth and that your lips have just kissed the holiest of books, you may tell the jury and the people here assembled what you know of this alleged murder of the miner, John Stackpole. Be as brief as possible, please," and the alcalde's eyes, as well as the eyes of every man gathered there, fastened themselves on the face of Bill Ugger.

"Wal," and the shifting eyes fixed themselves for a few brief moments on the ground in front of the big feet, "it happened like this. Me an' my pard, Spike, thar," and he nodded toward his companion, "was on our way from San Francisco tew Sacramento City an' th' diggin's a-hossback. Somehow we happened tew git off th' reg'lar trail, me an' Spike did; an' 'long 'bout noon, three days ago, we comed tew a leetle valley, with a leetle stream of water a-runnin' through it, an' a string of trees an' brush a-growin' 'longside th' water. Both on us bein' tired, we'd ben a-goin' since sun-up, we found a nice shady spot 'longside th' water, an', tyin' our hosses tew th' trees, both on us laid down for a short snooze. Course I don't know how long we'd ben a-snoozin', but, I reckon, 'twas 'bout a couple of hours, when we was both jerked out of a sound sleep by a yell of agony that sounded as if it comed from a man what had ben struck a mortal blow. Nat'rally that yell startled me an'

Spike sum, bein' that we both had been sound asleep; an', maybe, for a minute we sot a-lookin' intew each other's eyes, doin' nuthin'. Then Spike says: 'Sounded human, Bill. Like sumone had got his,' an' I seed that he was a-shiverin'; for 'tain't none pleasant tew be waked out of a sound sleep by th' death-cry of a human. 'An' it sounded as if it comed from right ayond that leetle clump of bushes,' an' he pointed a shakin' finger toward a leetle clump of bushes, 'bout a rod away, that shut out our view of th' valley. 'I reckon we'd better investergate,' an' we both began a-crawlin' toward that clump of bushes, not havin' heard no more sounds.

"Wal," and the shifty eyes shot swift glances from the face of the alcalde to the faces of the jury and the surrounding crowd, to note the effect of his words, "when we got tew them bushes an' looked through 'em—" He paused and laid a hand solemnly on the Bible lying on top of the barrel in front of the alcalde—"so help me God! this is what we saw. Th' valley in front of th' bushes was level an' open, so that we could see clear 'cross it; an', 'bout twenty rods from whar we was, we saw a man strugglin' violently on th' ground with two other men atop of him, while three hosses stood a leetle ways off a lookin' at 'em; an', even as we looked, we saw one of th' men flash a knife above his head an' plunge it down, an' th' man on th' ground stopped strugglin'.

"This was a leetle more'n Spike an' I was a-willin' tew stand for, an' we both jumps up out of th' bushes, an', drawin' our pistols, we had no rifles, we yells an' starts for them two men. Both on 'em jumps tew their feet, an' grabs up their rifles, an', afore you could say Jack, they had th' both on us covered, we not bein' near enough tew use our pistols. But we was close enough tew see 'em plain; an', afore God!—" The man stopped abruptly and, whirling suddenly about, pointed a finger dramatically directly into the face of Thure—"it was that young villain a-standin' thar what had his gun a-pointin' straight at me!"

Thure, in utter astonishment, took a quick step backward; and then, suddenly realizing what that pointing finger meant, backed by those startling words, he lost all control of himself for the moment and leaped straight toward Bill Ugger.

"It's a lie! A lie!" he yelled, as with all his young strength he struggled furiously with the great bulk of his antagonist. But, before either could do the other any harm, the strong hands of the sheriff seized Thure by the shoulders.

"Here, you young catamount!" and he jerked Thure violently backward, and lifted the butt of his heavy revolver threateningly, while his face hardened. "Quit it, or—" and the heavy butt descended lightly on Thure's head by way of warning.

"But he lied! Every word that he uttered was a lie!" and tears of rage gathered in Thure's eyes.

"Young man," the alcalde was now standing on his feet, all the sympathy gone from his face, "you will give me your word of honor not in any way again to do violence to the decorum of this court during this trial, or I shall order the sheriff to bind you hand and foot. Do I have your promise?" and he fixed his eyes sternly on the white face of Thure.

For a moment Thure stood silent. Then his young face hardened and his lips tightened into two thin straight lines. Reason again had firm hold of the helm.

"I promise," he answered quietly; "and I ask the court's pardon for my violent action. But the damnable lies told by that—"

"That will do," interrupted the alcalde. "Sheriff, if either of the prisoners forgets himself or our presence again, bind him hand and foot. Now," and he turned to Bill Ugger, who, as soon as Thure had been torn from him, had again returned quietly to his place before the official barrel, his red face flushed and his little eyes shining with triumph, "you may go on with your testimony, William Ugger. You were saying that you recognized one of the prisoners as one of the murderers and that he had you covered with his rifle. Remembering your oath and comprehending fully what your dreadful accusation means to a fellow human being, you still swear that the man who sprang up from the prostrate body and leveled his rifle at you was this pris-

oner?" and the alcalde's lifted hand indicated Thure.

The interest of the crowd surrounding the court had by this time become intense. Men were breathing heavily and their faces had hardened and an ugly look had come into their eyes. All now stretched their heads forward, as they listened almost breathlessly for the reply of Bill Ugger.

"I do," answered the man grimly. "I saw his face plain, a-lookin' at me above th' top of his rifle."

A deep growl went up from the surrounding crowd, a sound more like the throat mutterings of a monstrous tiger than anything human. The sheriff started and his keen eyes swiftly searched the circle of faces.

"I reckon thar ain't no need of waitin' for more testimony," cried a hoarse voice. "They was seen killin' th' man; an' that's all we wants tew know. Let judgement be pronounced, an' we'll 'tend tew th' ex'cutin' of it."

"Right!" yelled another. "There's no need of wasting more—"

"Silence!" thundered the alcalde, leaping to his feet. "This court, a court elected by your own authority, is trying the prisoners; and, by the Eternal Andrew Jackson! they shall not be declared guilty until they have been heard in their own defense, until they have been proven guilty in full accordance with the laws of this city. William Ugger, you may go on with your testimony. There will be no fur-

ther interruptions," and the alcalde quietly laid a couple of big revolvers down on top of the barrel, one on each side of the Bible.

At this moment and when all eyes were bent on the alcalde, Thure felt a slight jerk on his coat sleeve, and, glancing down, saw that the smaller of their accusers, the pock-marked man, had moved up close to his side and that it had been his hand that had jerked his sleeve.

"Read at once," and the man swiftly slipped a piece of paper into his hand. "It is your only hope," and he moved away, not having once even glanced toward Thure.

Thure, stepping a little behind Bud and holding the paper so that no eyes but his own could see it, cautiously opened the note and slowly read these words:

If you wil give us the miners map and promice tu say nuthin bout the gold kave Bill and me wil sudenly diskuver that we is mistakin in thinkin that you was the ones tu kil old Stakpole and you wil go free. If you dont you wil both hang afore sun down tu nite and al the gold in Caleforny aint wurth as much tu you as is yur lives. If you agrees tu this nod yur hed 2 times. If you dont git redy tu hang.

The note was unsigned; and no signature was necessary. Its meaning was plain. The two boys were to surrender the skin map to the two scoundrels and say nothing about the Cave of Gold; or,

the dreadful plot, in whose meshes they found themselves so tightly ensnared, was to be followed out to its horrible conclusion. The motive back of the two men's action now stood revealed. They expected to frighten the two boys into giving up the skin map and into keeping secret their knowledge of the Cave of Gold. But, what a fiendish plot! And with what diabolical cunning it had all been worked out and was being executed!

Thure read the note through slowly; and, in a flash, he had comprehended the whole atrocious scheme and with what devilish cunning circumstances had been manipulated to bring about their present terrible situation; but, only the furious look in his eyes showed how the note had affected him.

"From Pockface," he whispered, as he quietly slipped the paper into Bud's hand. "Read it on the sly; and then give me your answer."

Bud cautiously took the note and opened it, wondering greatly at its coming from Pockface. He read it through slowly, comprehendingly; and then he turned and glanced into Thure's face. One look was sufficient.

During all this time Pockface's eyes had been covertly watching the boys.

Bud now waited until he saw that the man's eyes were upon him, then he deliberately raised the piece of paper to his mouth, spit on it, and, bending down, placed it under the heel of his boot, ground it to pieces in the ground, and, defiantly turning his back

on the man, gave his attention to the doings of the alcalde.

The two scoundrels had misjudged the courage and the pluck of two American boys like Thure Conroyal and Bud Randolph; and, judging from the scowls that disfigured their faces and the ugly light that flashed into their eyes, at the sight of Bud's actions, in their disappointment, they would show them no mercy. They would get the map, or they would hang the boys. Indeed, this action on their part now became almost necessary; for, if they did not succeed in hanging the boys, the boys, in all probability, would succeed in hanging them.

This dramatic byplay had taken but a short time in the enacting and had passed unnoticed in the excitement occasioned by the threats from the surrounding crowd and the placing of the alcalde's two big revolvers by the side of the Bible on top of the barrel standing in front of him. When it was over and Thure and Bud again gave their attention to the court, Bill Ugger was about to continue with his testimony, the majority of the crowd having shown themselves so plainly in sympathy with the actions of the alcalde that the rougher ones evidently thought it wise to keep quiet.

"As I was a-sayin'," continued Bill Ugger, when everything had quieted down again, "afore we could git near enough tew th' murderers tew use our pistols, they held us up with their rifles, an' ordered us tew git an' git lively; an', by way of makin' plain

their meanin', that skunk," and he glared at Thure, "sent a bullet a-whistlin' so close tew my ears that it made this hole through th' brim of my hat," and the man held up his wide-brimmed hat and pointed with his finger to a little round hole in the brim close to the crown. "Three inches more tew one side an' he'd a-got me, tew.

"Wal, me an' Spike didn't stop tew argy none after that; but got back ahind them bushes an' trees as sudden as our legs would take us. But," and Ugger paused and glared at Thure and Bud, "if I knowed I was on my deathbed an' a-goin' tew die in five minits, I'd be willin' tew swear that th' tew murderers was them tew boys a-standin' thar. We saw their faces plain an' thar ain't no mistake," and his eyes flashed an ugly look in the direction of Thure and Bud.

"Of course," continued Bill Ugger, "they didn't dare follow us, 'cause, if they did, they knowed we could hide ahind a tree an' pot 'em, which we'd ben sum glad tew do," and his eyes glowed vindictively. "Wal, we waited, hid ahind th' bushes an' trees, not darin' tew show ourselves an' bein' tew far off tew do any pistol shootin', a-hopin' that they'd ride off an' leave th' body of th' man they'd robbed an' probably killed, but they was tew cunnin' tew do that; for, in a leetle while, they throwed th' body, like it was a bag of grain, across th' back of one of th' hosses an' tied it thar; an' then they rode off, a-leadin' th' hoss with th' body on it ahind 'em.

Me an' Spike waited 'til they'd gone out of sight over th' top of a distant hill an' then we made for th' spot of th' killin'. Th' grass was sum tread up an' bloody; an' lyin' in th' blood an' partly tread intew th' ground, we found this," and Ugger thrust his hand into one of his pockets and pulled out a small daguerreotype-case, perhaps a couple of inches square, on which could be plainly seen ominous stains of red.

"This," and he held up the small case where all could see, "has inside of it th' picter of as handsum a lady as I ever seed; an' under th' picter is writ, in a woman's writin,' these words: 'Tew my beloved husband, John Stackpole'; an' we reckoned, me an' Spike did, as how th' murdered man's name must a-ben John Stackpole. See for yourselves," and he handed the case to the alcalde, who, after opening it and looking at the picture inside and the blood stains on the outside, passed it on to the jury, who examined it carefully.

"Of course," continued Ugger, after he had watched the effect of the daguerreotype on the alcalde and the jury for a minute, "bein' bound for th' diggin's an' knowin' 'twould be almost useless tew try an' trail th' murderers, me an' Spike at once started on our way ag'in for Sacermento City, not expectin' tew see them murderers ag'in, leastwise not so soon. We got intew th' city this mornin'; an' was a-standin' on th' street a-lookin' at th' humans

a-passin' by, when who should come a-ridin' along right afore our eyes, but them tew identickle young fellers what we had seen kill that man; an', of course, bein' honest an' law-abidin' men, me an' Spike seen tew it that they didn't git away a second time. Now, I reckon, that's all I've got tew tell, only," and again his eyes turned vindictively to Thure and Bud, "thar ain't ben no mistake made an' you've got th' right men; an' if they don't hang afore night, then thar ain't no justice in Sacremento City. I'm done."

The alcalde sat for a moment looking straight in front of him. Evidently he was swiftly reviewing the man's testimony to see if there were any points that needed clearing up; but everything had been told, apparently, in such a clear, straightforward manner that there seemed to be nothing that needed explaining, and, with a sigh as he thought of the youthfulness of the prisoners, the alcalde turned to the jury.

"Would you like to ask the witness any questions?" he inquired.

"No. Everything seems to have been told as clear and as straight as a string," one of them replied, and all the others nodded their assent to this statement.

"Have the prisoners any questions they wish to ask the witness?" and the alcalde turned to Thure and Bud.

For a moment the two boys consulted together. Then Thure said quietly: "No, there is nothing that either of us would care to ask that man."

"The prisoner is dismissed for the present," and the alcalde motioned Bill Ugger to step back from in front of the barrel.

CHAPTER X

THE MISSING BUTTON

“**Y**OU may step forward and be sworn,” and the alcalde turned his shrewd eyes on the pock-marked face of the small man.

The man stepped quickly forward; but, just before he reached the barrel, a sudden gleam shot into his eyes, which at that moment happened to be bent on the ground and looking at the spot where Thure and Ugger had had their brief but vigorous struggle. The next instant his foot apparently caught in a root that protruded above the ground; and he stumbled and fell violently downward, both outstretched hands clutching at the ground. As he jumped hastily to his feet, his face very red and his mouth flowing with apologies to the alcalde for his clumsiness, he glanced downward swiftly into one of his hands, and then, with another quick gleam of cunning triumph in his eyes, he quickly slipped the hand into one of his pockets, and, taking his place in front of the barrel, faced the alcalde.

“What is your name and present business?” the alcalde asked, when he had sworn the witness, in the same manner Ugger had been sworn, to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth.

"Spikenard Quinley," the man answered, shifting his eyes quickly from the face of the alcalde to the two big revolvers on top of the barrel; "but most of my friends jest call me Spike, for short. I'm bound for th' diggin's, 'long with my pard, Bill Ugger, him who jest testified."

"Tell the jury all that you know about the case now before it; and make your testimony as brief as possible, please," and the alcalde settled back on his rude seat and fixed his eyes on the face of the witness.

Quinley did not prove to be as dramatic a witness as Ugger had been; but he told a seemingly straightforward and honest story of how he and his partner had witnessed the killing of the man supposed to be John Stackpole, that differed only in the manner of its telling from the one already told by Ugger, and, consequently, need not be repeated here. He, also, was very positive that the two men, who had jumped up from the prostrate body of the man and had held them up with their rifles, were the two prisoners; and right here he introduced a bit of new corroborative evidence in a most effective and dramatic manner.

He had completed his testimony and had been dismissed by the alcalde and had started away from the court-barrel, when he suddenly stopped, as if he had unexpectedly remembered something that might have a bearing on the case, and turned to the alcalde.

"Excuse me, y'ur honor," he said, as he thrust a

hand into one of his pockets, the same pocket into which he had thrust the same hand a moment after his tumble over the root, "but I've jest reckerlected that I've sumthin' right here in my pocket that might help tew identify the prisoners as the murderers, an' ag'in it might not—not that me and Bill needs any more identifn', but, naterly, you, not seein' 'em kill th' man, ain't so sart'in an' wants all th' proof that you can git tew show that you shore have got the right party; an' so, if y'ur honor don't object, I've got a leetle sumthin' more that I'd like tew introduce as testimony, that might, an' ag'in it might not, help tew make th' identity of th' prisoners more shore," and he paused, still keeping his hand in his pocket.

"This court is always ready to hear any testimony that has any bearing on the case before it," the alcalde said. "Take your place again on the witness stand," and he nodded toward the barrel.

Quinley at once returned to his place in front of the barrel.

"Now, remembering that you are still under oath to tell God's truth, you may introduce your evidence," and the alcalde half-rose from his seat in his anxiety to see what this new evidence might be.

"Of course, I'm none shore that it belongs tew either of th' prisoners," Quinley began. "It might have come from th' clothes of th' murdered man, an' ag'in it might have come from th' clothes of th' prisoners, an' ag'in th' prisoners might not have on th' same clothes tew-day that they did when they killed

th' man, an' so it might prove nuthin'; but, right whar th' grass was tread up th' worst on th' spot whar we saw th' man killed, I found this—" and the hand came out of the pocket and was extended toward the alcalde, holding on its palm a button. "Now I'd plumb forgot all about th' findin' of this button, not settin' any store on it, when, jest as I was a-leavin' th' witness stand, th' thought popped intew my head, that, if th' prisoners happened tew have on th' same clothes they had on when they murdered the man an' th' button came from their clothes, then I had in my pocket important evidence, 'cause th' button is a peekuler lookin' button, an', I reckon, thar must be more buttons like it on th' clothes whar it come from. I asks that th' clothes of th' prisoners be examined tew see if either on 'em has buttons on like this," and he handed the button to the alcalde.

The alcalde took the button and sat for a moment staring at it as it lay on the palm of his hand—a small thing, but it might help to weave the rope that would hang two human beings!

"Git a-goin'," shouted someone impatiently from the surrounding crowd, "an' see if either of th' prisoners has got any buttons on his clothes like that you're a-holdin' in y'ur hand. If he has, I reckon, thar won't be any need of takin' any more testimonies."

A dozen voices shouted their approval of this statement. Evidently the sympathies of the crowd were being fast turned from Thure and Bud.

The alcalde arose slowly to his feet.

"This court," he said sternly, "is here to see that the prisoners are given a fair trial, guilty or not guilty; and judgment shall not be pronounced until the case has been fairly tried and their innocence or their guilt fully established. This cannot be done until the prisoners themselves have been heard in their own defense. Let us hear no more talk of mob judgment and mob execution. The court will pronounce judgment, and the court will see that its judgment is promptly executed, to the full satisfaction of every honest law-abiding man in the city." He paused for a moment, while his keen eyes sternly searched the faces of the surrounding crowd. There was no response to his words and challenging glance.

"This button," he continued quietly, holding up the button that Quinley had handed him where all could see it, "the witness swears was picked up by himself from the ground, where the struggle between the murdered man and his murderers took place, and is presumed to have come either from the clothing of the murdered man or from the clothing of his murderers; and the witness asks that the clothing of the two prisoners be examined to see if like buttons can be found on their clothing. The contentions of the witness, regarding the value of this button as evidence in the case before us, are just. Therefore his request is granted and the prisoners are ordered to be examined. Young

man," and he turned to Bud, "you will please come forward; and allow the gentlemen of the jury to compare this button with the buttons on your clothing," and he handed the button he held in his hand to the foreman of the jury.

The production of this button by Quinley was a surprise to Thure and Bud. If it should prove to have come from the clothing of one of them, it certainly would look suspicious; but, how could it have come from their clothes, at least from the clothes they now had on, since neither of them were now wearing the same garments that they had worn on the day of the hunt, when they had found the murdered miner? Consequently the introducing of the button as evidence by Quinley had caused both of them more surprise than it had uneasiness, surprise that Quinley should care to introduce such meaningless evidence as he must know the button to be, since the examination of their clothing could only prove that the button belonged to neither of them. The episode of Quinley's stumble, in the excitement of the trial, had passed from both of their minds, as, doubtless, it had from the minds of all the others; but, even if they had remembered it, they would not have thought of connecting it in any way with the finding of the button. Hence Bud, at the summons of the alcalde, had stepped forward promptly and confidently.

"We find two buttons missing from the prisoner's coat," announced the foreman of the jury, when

the examination of Bud had been completed. "But, since the button offered in evidence bears no resemblance in design or size to the buttons remaining on the coat, we declare that so far as this prisoner is concerned the button in question proves nothing."

"You may return to your place by the side of the sheriff," and the alcalde gave an almost audible sigh of relief, while something very near like a cheer came from the crowd. It was hard to look into those two young clear-eyed faces and believe that they masked the hearts of murderers.

Bud hurried back to his place by the side of the sheriff, with the first smile on his lips that had so far brightened his face during the trial.

"Now," and the alcalde turned to Thure, "let the jury compare the button with the buttons on your clothing," and the anxious look came back on his face.

Thure, with the same promptness and confidence that Bud had displayed, advanced and submitted to the examination; but, hardly had he reached the foreman of the jury, when the excited actions of the jurymen told all that an important discovery of some kind had been made; and their report was awaited with almost breathless interest.

"We find," began the foreman, speaking slowly, after every man on the jury had carefully compared the button Quinley had handed to the alcalde with the buttons on Thure's coat, "one button missing

from the prisoner's coat." He paused a moment, and then continued, raising his voice a little: "We also find that the button handed to the alcalde by the witness, Spikenard Quinley, and said to have been found by him on the spot of ground where the struggle took place between the murdered man and his murderers, to be exactly similar in design, size, and shape to the remaining buttons on the prisoner's coat, and that it appears to be the missing button."

"But—but," stammered Thure, his face white and tense with excitement, "that button, if it came from my clothes, could not have been found on the ground where the miner was murdered. Why, I did not even have on the same clothes that day that I have on now—"

"What!" and the alcalde jumped to his feet, his face white and stern, while again that deep-throated growl went up from the crowd, "What do you mean by 'that day?' Do you realize that your expression amounts almost to a confession of guilt?"

"No," and Thure turned firmly to the alcalde. By a desperate effort he had recovered his self-control. "It means, if that button was found on the spot where the miner was murdered, that it did not come from my clothes; for I did not have on the same clothes on the day we found the wounded miner that I have on now. The button, if it came from my clothes, and I confess that it looks as if it

did, must have been got by that man in some other way," and Thure's eyes flashed wrathfully in the direction of Quinley, who grinned and touched his neck suggestively.

A hoarse laugh, that had no sound of mirth in it, came from the surrounding crowd, at this improbable explanation of Thure, an explanation that strengthened rather than weakened their belief in the testimony of Quinley; but a look of relief, as well as of surprise, came on the face of the alcalde.

"Ah, I forgot. We have not yet heard your story. You say that you found the miner, John Stackpole, found him wounded?" he asked eagerly. "Then he is still alive?"

"Yes, we found him," Thure answered slowly, "found him in the hands of his murderers, but not in time to save him. He died before we could get him home."

"Died! And in your hands!" and again the alcalde's face grew stern, and again that hoarse unbelieving laugh came from the crowd. "Young man, do you realize that you are telling a very improbable-sounding story? But," and the alcalde resumed his judicial gravity of countenance, "I am forgetting that you are not on the witness stand. The button, it appears then, came from the prisoner's coat," and he turned to the foreman of the jury.

"It does," answered the foreman gravely.

"The prisoner may return to his place by the side

of the sheriff. Now," and the alcalde's eyes searched the surrounding faces, "is there anyone else present who has any testimony to give against the prisoners now on trial before this court for the murder of John Stackpole?" and he paused, to give anyone who wished to do so time to come forward.

"I reckon the testimony is plenty sufficient as it now stands," and a huge brutal-looking man pushed his way through the crowd and faced the alcalde. "Haven't two reputable witnesses sworn that they saw the prisoners kill the man? Didn't one of them find a button that has been proven to belong to the coat of one of the prisoners on the very spot where the man was killed? And what can be offered in disproof of all this? Nothing but the word of the prisoners themselves, who certainly would lie to save their necks, if they would kill a man to get his gold. I move," and he whirled about and faced the crowd, now muttering and growling like a huge beast, "that the jury be instructed to render their verdict now, so that we can hang them two young devils and get about our business. All in favor—"

"Wait!" The alcalde's voice rang out clear and imperative; and, as he spoke, he stepped out in front of the barrel, one of the big revolvers held in each hand. "Before you put your motion I have a few words to say; and, after I have said my few words, you can put your motion; and we will see

whether the men of Sacramento City stand for law and justice or for mob brutality."

"Hear! Hear!" shouted a number of voices. "The alcalde shall be heard!"

"Men," continued the alcalde, his voice ringing with intense earnestness, "I stand not here to plead for mercy in behalf of these two young men, although their youth might almost justify such a plea. I am here to demand justice. If this court, after fair trial shall find them guilty of the brutal murder charged against them, then, in the name of the same justice that I now invoke to protect them, they must hang; for, in a community situated as we are, self-protection compels us to deal with murderers with stern and relentless hands. But—Hear my words!—the prisoners have not yet been proven guilty before this court. They have not yet had fair trial. They have not yet even been heard in their own defense. When I took my oath of office to serve you as alcalde, that oath, the oath you yourselves compelled me to swear, bound me to see that every prisoner brought before me had fair and speedy trial. I meant to keep that oath then; and, by the Eternal Andrew Jackson! I mean to keep it now, if need be with my life. Now, you can put your motion," and, with a couple of quick strides, the alcalde placed himself by the side of the sheriff, near the two prisoners, the two big revolvers held ready for instant use. He knew

that the only way to check mob violence was to stop it before it gathered momentum.

"Give the prisoners justice!" "They shall have justice!" "Hurrah, for the alcalde!" shouted a hundred voices; and stern-faced men pushed themselves through the crowd from every direction and formed a cordon around the prisoners and the court.

"Go on with the trial. We will see that the court is sustained," and a man stepped out from the surrounding cordon and bowed to the alcalde.

The mutterings and growlings suddenly ceased. The huge brutal-looking man slunk back into the crowd, his motion unput.

In the midst of these exciting moments, when the attention of all was concentrated on the alcalde, Bud suddenly felt a hand thrust something into his hand from behind. He turned quickly. Bill Ugger stood not four feet behind him.

"Read," and Ugger moved a couple of steps back and to one side.

Bud glanced down at his hand and saw that he held a bit of folded paper. Hastily, yet cautiously, he unfolded it and read these words scrawled on it with a lead pencil:

Me and Spike kan yit save you. Give up the miners map and promis to tell nobudy of the kave of gold and we wil git you free. Refuse and we wil let you hang and then git the map off yur ded bodies we wil git the map anyway so whats the use of given up yur lives. Weve got things fixed

so that you kant eskape the rope unles we save you so youve got to give us the map or hang. Make yur own choice taint our funrel.

If you agrees nod yur hed 2 times to Spike and you wil be free in less than 10 minits.

Bud read these words through slowly; and then, moving up close to Thure, he passed the paper to him.

"Read it," he said, fixing his eyes anxiously on his comrade's face.

By this time both boys saw plainly how strong was the web of evidence that the two villains had so cunningly succeeded in throwing around them; and how completely they appeared to have them in their power. And what could they do or say to disprove their testimony? Their own tale, looked at in the light of the evidence of the two men, would seem improbable, would sound like a tale made up to fit the occasion. And they could not bring forward a single witness to prove its truthfulness! No wonder the unfortunate boys were tempted to give up the skin map; for what is gold, when weighed in the balance against life?

Thure read the note; and then turned to Bud, his face white and his heart throbbing with anxiety.

"What shall our answer be?" he asked in a whisper. "I hate like sin to give up the skin map to them two scoundrels; but, I reckon, our fathers and mothers would rather have our lives than the

gold. But," and his face brightened a little, "we have not yet given our testimony. I reckon we had better wait until we see how the alcalde and the jury take our stories before giving up the map."

"Yes," agreed Bud, his own face brightening at the thought of putting off the surrender a little longer, "we will wait and see what effect our testimony has. But, I guess you are right, if it comes to hanging," and he shuddered, "or giving up the map, we'll have to give up the map. But we won't give up until we've got to," and his face hardened. "Who'd a thought them two scoundrels could get us in such a terrible fix!" and he glared wrathfully in the direction of the two men, who now stood close together regarding Thure and Bud with furtive but anxious eyes.

"Now to give them two skunks their answer," and Thure, holding the paper out where the two men could see it, deliberately tore it to pieces and, turning his back scornfully to them, gave his attention to the doings of the court.

CHAPTER XI

AN UNEXPECTED WITNESS

THE alcalde, the moment he saw that the mob spirit had been subdued, had returned quietly to his place behind the barrel; and, when the two boys again gave their attention to him, he had just reached his rude seat of judgment, and was about to speak.

"I knew," he said, as his keen eyes searched the faces of the men, who had so opportunely formed the cordon of safety around him and his court, "that I could depend on the good sense and fair-mindedness of the people of Sacramento City. We will now proceed with the trial," and he quietly slipped back both of his revolvers into his coat pockets.

"Once more," and the alcalde raised his voice so that all could hear, "the court asks, is there any other witness to bear testimony against the two prisoners, if so, let him now step forward."

For a minute or two the alcalde waited. There was no movement, no word from the surrounding crowd.

"We will now proceed with the examination of the prisoners. Young man, take your place on the

witness stand," and the alcalde turned to Thure.

"Don't get excited. Keep cool," cautioned Bud, as Thure hastened to take his place in front of the barrel.

A hush came over the great encircling crowd, as Thure stood before the alcalde and was solemnly sworn to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth. Many of those rough bearded men had sons of their own back at home, hardly younger than was the prisoner, who now stood before the bar of justice, with a rope dangling threateningly above his head; and these men found it hard to believe that that wholesome-looking, clear-eyed youth could be guilty of the atrocious crime charged against him. But, there was the evidence; and the laws of the city must be enforced; and their faces grew stern and sad.

Thure told his story in a clear straightforward way; told how he and Bud had gone out for a hunt on that day, how they had heard the death-cry of the unfortunate horse and had slain the huge grizzly, how, just after they had completed the skinning of the grizzly, they had seen the struggle of the old miner with his two assailants and had rushed to his rescue, how the robbers had fled, leaving the miner robbed and mortally stabbed, how they had endeavored to get him to their home before he died, but had failed, and, finally, how the miner had died and they had borne his dead body home and had buried it.

There was hardly a loud sound made while Thure was telling his story. One could almost have heard the great crowd breathing. When he had spoken of witnessing the struggle between the miner and his murderers and of rushing to his rescue, there had been a great stir in the crowd, but it had quickly subsided, so eager were all to hear every word that he uttered. His manner and his story made a deep impression; but, alas, it was soon seen that his evidence had introduced nothing to disprove the testimony of his two accusers that had any stronger proof back of it than his own word and the word of his fellow prisoner, while he had admitted bringing the dead body of the murdered miner home and burying it, admitted having the dead body of the miner in his possession. This, at least, was in direct proof of what his accusers had testified; for they had sworn that they had seen the two boys bear the dead body off with them. It looked as if they had made their story up to fit in with the accounts of the previous witnesses and yet disprove the story of their accusers.

Thure, so far in his testimony, had said nothing of the description the old miner had given of his murderers. He was saving that for the last, to be brought out by the questions of the alcalde, if possible. He wished to make it as emphatic and striking as possible, and yet he did not wish to appear to give it voluntarily; for he was wise enough to see that for him and Bud to accuse their accusers might re-

act back on themselves. Fortunately the questions of the alcalde led directly to it.

"You testify," began the alcalde, the moment Thure had apparently completed his testimony, "that you drove the murderers away from the body of the miner. Did you get near enough to them to recognize them again, should you see them?"

"No," Thure answered. "I could only swear that one was a large man and that the other was small."

"Did you discover anything that would lead you to surmise who committed the crime?" again asked the alcalde.

"No, not directly," answered Thure hesitatingly. "But the old miner, just before he died, gave us a description of his two murderers," and he stopped.

"How did he describe them? Why do you hesitate?" asked the alcalde sharply.

"Because," answered Thure boldly, "the description the dying miner gave of his two murderers appears to make us accuse our accusers, as if we were trying to get back at them, when it is God's truth that we are uttering."

"Give us the description. We are the ones to judge of its merits," commanded the alcalde, his face flushing with interest, while the surrounding crowd became breathless.

Bud was looking at the two men; and he saw both of them start at the words of Thure and glance apprehensively into each other's eyes.

"The miner said," and Thure turned his eyes full upon Bill Ugger, "that one of his murderers was a large, red-headed man with a broken nose; and that the other," and his eyes turned to the face of Spike Quinley, "was a small man, with a pock-marked face."

For a moment no one spoke. All eyes were bent on the faces of the two men. There was no mistaking to whom the description applied. Then a harsh laugh broke from Bill Ugger.

"Tryin' to turn th' tables on us, be you?" and again he laughed. "Wal, I reckon, ever'one here believes that yarn. It fits tew pat, not tew be true. So me an' Spike are th' true murderers, be we? Wal, this is sum unexpected an' s'prisin', ain't it Spike?" and he turned to his comrade, grinning and glaring like a huge buffoon; but a close observer might have noticed that his skin had whitened beneath its red beard.

Quinley had started perceptibly at Thure's description of the miner's murderers, but he had quickly controlled himself, and a deadly gleam had come into his wicked little eyes and his thin lips had tightened, as, unperceived by all eyes, except the eyes the movement was intended for, he had turned and given a man standing in the edge of the circle a signal. The man at once had slipped back in the crowd and vanished.

"Powerful s'prisin'," and Quinley turned and grinned back into the face of Ugger. "I reckon

you can already feel th' rope a-tightenin' 'round y'ur neck, can't you, Bill? That description sart'in fits us as pat as an old shoe. But th' s'prisin'est thing 'bout it all is, that I don't 'pear tew have any rekerlections of a-committin' that murder. Must have ben dreamin', when I done it."

The eyes of the alcalde, during this brief byplay, had been closely watching the faces of the two men. He now turned to Thure again.

"Have you any witnesses, other than your fellow prisoner, to testify to the truth of your statements?" he asked.

"No," answered Thure; "except that our mothers and our sisters and the folks at the rancho can testify to our bringing home the body of the dead miner and that we told them that we had found him just as I have said that we did."

"That would prove nothing as to who committed the murder. Is there anyone in Sacramento City that knows either of you two boys?"

"No," again answered Thure. "Not that I know of, unless," and his face brightened, "Captain Sutter is here. He knows both of us well. We are expecting to find our dads at Hangtown."

"Captain Sutter is not here," answered the alcalde, "as anyone in the city might have told you; and it is impossible to send to Hangtown after your fathers."

"But, are we to be proven guilty on the evidence of those two men alone, whom I am almost certain

committed the crime themselves?" and Thure's face flushed indignantly. "Is not our word, at least, as good as theirs?"

"Young man," replied the alcalde sternly, "that is for the jury to decide. Have you any further evidence to give? If not, and the jury do not wish to ask you any questions," he paused and glanced toward the foreman, who shook his head, "you are dismissed, and the other prisoner can take his place on the witness stand."

For a moment Thure hesitated. He wanted to say something, to do something to further disprove this horrible accusation—but, what could he say or do that he had not already said or done? He had told his story. There was nothing more for him to tell, nothing more for him to do; and, with tightly compressed lips, he turned and walked from the witness stand back to his place by the side of the sheriff, while Bud took his place in front of the barrel.

There was nothing new in Bud's testimony. He could only repeat, in different words, what Thure had already told.

While Bud was giving his testimony, Spike Quinley worked his way up close to Thure; and again a piece of paper was slipped furtively into his hand.

Thure glanced down at the paper. At least here was a chance to escape the worst. If Bud did not make a better impression than he apparently had,

then there would be nothing left but to surrender the map, that or hanging. And it must be done soon now, or it would be too late. Thure shuddered at the thought of the hanging; and, with fingers that trembled a little, cautiously opened the paper and read these dreadful words:

You have gone and done it now you infernal idjit by testifin' agin us it is now yur necks or ourn al hel kant save you now you can keep the map and we wil git it off yur ded bodies and you kan have the satisfackshun of noin that you might have ben alive and wel when yur danglin ded at the end of a rope.

The vindictive scrawl closed with a rude attempt to draw a rope, hanging from a tree, with a man dangling from one end.

Thure stared blankly at the paper for a moment after he had read the words that appeared to close their last avenue of escape. He saw clearly the force of their meaning. It had, indeed, now become a battle for life between him and Bud and their two accusers. Their testimony, once they were free, would turn suspicion directly upon Quinley and Ugger. It would be suicidal for the two men now to attempt to do anything to free them. Thure raised his eyes and looked wildly around, at the face of the alcalde, the faces of the jury, and the faces of the surrounding crowd. On all was a look of ominous sadness and sternness that made his

heart sink. Evidently the words and the actions of the cunning Ugger and the crafty Quinley had again completely turned the tide against them. But the worst blow was yet to come.

Bud completed his testimony and, in an ominous silence, was dismissed. The alcalde arose from his judgment-stump and turned to address a few final words to the jury; but, as the first word left his mouth, a commotion occurred in the crowd directly in front of him.

"More testimony! Important testimony!" shouted a voice; and a man, with his right arm done up in a sling, pushed his way through the encircling crowd.

The man hastily and keenly scrutinized the faces of the two prisoners.

"Yes, them's sart'inly th' fellers," he said aloud; and turned his eyes on the faces of their accusers.

"Them's shore th' same two men I seed. Thar's no mistaking them faces," he declared, with conviction. "Now," and he turned to the alcalde, "I asks y'ur pardon, y'ur honor; but, bein' sum crippled with a broken arm, as you can see, an', on that account, keepin' sum close in my tent, I heared nuthin' of this trial 'til jest a few minits ago; but, when I did hear of it, I felt mortally sart'in that it had tew do with th' same murder that I witness in th' Sacremento Valley three days ago; an', wantin' tew see that justice made no mistake, I got here as quick as I could, tew give in my testimony. Hope I'm

not tew late," and he fixed his eyes anxiously on the face of the alcalde.

"No; you are not too late," the alcalde answered, looking at the man keenly, "if your evidence is of real importance."

"I reckon it is of real importance," answered the man, "seein' that I saw th' killin' done with my own two eyes; an' was close enough tew reckonize th' killers plain."

This statement caused a big sensation in the surrounding crowd. All pressed nearer, and stretched their heads eagerly forward to get a sight of this new witness, while, "Hush!" "Quiet!" "Shut your mouth!" and like expressions, came from all around the crowding circle of men.

Thure and Bud had both started with pleased surprise at the words of this unexpected witness, and their faces lighted up with hope. Here, at last, was a witness who would tell the truth, who would free them from this horrible accusation of murder; for, evidently by his actions, he was as much of a stranger to Ugger and Quinley as he was to themselves, and, consequently, he could not be in league with their two cunning and mendacious accusers. They glanced at the two men. Their surprise appeared to be real; and the two boys thought they detected a look of fearful consternation on each face.

"Step forward and be sworn," commanded the alcalde, the moment the buzz of the excitement

caused by the words of the man with the broken arm had ceased.

The man stepped quickly in front of the barrel; and was sworn, in the same manner the other witnesses had been sworn, to tell the truth.

"What is your name and business?" demanded the alcalde.

"John Skoonly," replied the man; "an' I'm bound for th' diggin's. Jest got in from San Francisco this mornin'."

"Now, John Skoonly," and the alcalde's eyes rested steadily on the witness's face as he settled back on his stump, "kindly tell the jury and the people gathered here, what you know of the case now being tried before them."

"I was on my way from San Francisco tew here," began the witness, "when three days ago I wandered off th' main trail tew do a little huntin' an' was throwed by my hoss an' broke my right arm. That took all th' hunt out of me; an' I laid down under sum trees that growed 'long side a crik tew try an' do sumthin' tew ease up th' pain an' tew git a little rest afore I started back for th' trail.

"Wal, I reckon I hadn't ben thar more'n half an hour, when I heared a screech that fairly lifted my hat off my head, a-comin' from th' open valley, jest beyont th' trees whar I was a-lyin' in th' shade, an' a-soundin' like sum feller was gittin' hurt mortal bad. I jumps up quick an' runs tew sum bushes that growed a-treen me an' th' sound, an'

looks through 'em, a little cautious-like on account of my broken arm, an' seed three men a-strugglin' on th' ground not more'n forty rods from whar I was; an' th' next I knowed I heard a lot of yellin', an' seen tew men jump out of th' bushes sum twenty rods below me, an' start runnin' for them fightin' men. But, afore they'd made a dozen jumps, tew of them men springs up from th' ground, th' other man didn't 'pear tew have any spring left in him, but lay still, grabs up their rifles an' hollers tew them runnin' men tew stop sudden, or they'd shoot; an' th' men stops sudden, they havin' only pistols. Then th' tew men with rifles yells for them tew git an' git quick, an' one on 'em fires his rifle; an', I reckon, th' bullet must have come close, for th' tew men whirled 'bout like they was sum scart an' started back for th' bushes.

"Th' tew men now picks up th' body of th' third man, which hangs limp like he was dead, an' flings it across th' back of one of their hosses an' ties it thar. Then they mounts th' other tew hosses an' goes a-ridin' off a-leadin' the hoss with th' dead body across its back ahind 'em; an' in ridin' off, they comes within a dozen rods of whar I was a-hidin', an' I sees 'em plain, an' I was s'prised tew see that they didn't look tew be much more'n boys; an' yit they 'peared tew have killed a man!

"Y'ur honor," and the man paused and whirled partly around, and when he continued again his voice was very solemn, "as shore as thar is a God

in heaven, th' tew men that I saw a-ridin' by me, with that dead body on th' hoss ahind them, are a-standin' right thar!" and he pointed straight toward Thure and Bud.

A sound of horror and of rage went up from the surrounding crowd, a sound that had the promise of dreadful things to come in it.

The alcalde leaped to his feet, his face looking white and drawn; for he knew that now the two boys were doomed, and, somehow, in spite of all the terrible evidence, he could not look into their clear-eyed faces and believe them guilty of such a horrible crime.

"Silence! Silence, men!" he commanded, stretching out both of his hands imperatively. "Silence! I have questions, important questions to ask the witness."

Almost instantly the great crowd became still, so anxious were all now to hear every word.

"John Skoonly," and the alcalde turned to the witness, "you swear that you saw two men start to the rescue of the murdered man. Did you see these two men plainly enough to recognize them should you see them again?"

"Sart'in'," replied the man promptly, and, whirling about, he pointed to Quinley and Ugger, "Thar they stand. I'd know them mugs ag'in anywhar," and he grinned.

"Why," continued the alcalde, "did you not make your presence known to these two men, at least after

the murderers had ridden off? There would not have been any danger then," and he smiled scornfully; "and they might have been of help to you in your crippled condition."

"Wal," answered the man frankly, turning and looking squarely into the faces of Ugger and Quinley, "tew be honest, I didn't like th' looks of them tew faces none tew much; an', as I had consider'ble of money 'long with me, I reckoned 'twould be safer for me tew travel alone jest then, so I jest sneaked out 'tother side of th' trees an' rode back tew th' trail alone."

Quinley and Ugger scowled at this frank reference to their looks; and a few in the encircling crowd laughed grimly. Plainly there could be no collusion between this witness and Ugger and Quinley; and this apparent fact gave almost the positiveness of proven truth to his testimony, in the eyes of the crowd.

"Then," and the alcalde looked sharply into the face of the witness, "you never saw either William Ugger or Spikenard Quinley, until you saw them, as described in your testimony, on the day of the murder?"

"If y'ur meanin' that little pock-marked runt an' that big red-readed feller with a smashed nose, a-standin' thar, I sart'inly never did see them afore that identickle moment. Why, I didn't even know their names 'til you spoke 'em out."

Again some of the crowd laughed in a grim sort

of a way; and again Ugger and Quinley scowled and glared wrathfully at the frank-spoken witness.

"I am done," the alcalde said quietly, turning to the jury. "Do you, gentlemen of the jury, wish to ask the witness any questions?"

"No," replied the foreman, after a glance into the faces of his fellow jurymen. "Your questions have brought out the only points we wished to inquire about."

"Do the prisoners wish to ask the witness any questions?" and the alcalde turned to Thure and Bud.

For a moment neither boy spoke, neither boy moved. The testimony of this witness, so different from what they had expected, had dumfounded them. They felt that he had knocked the last prop out from under their safety; and all the horrors of their situation had dropped down on their spirits with crushing, numbing force. Their minds, their nerves, their very muscles were paralyzed, for the moment, by the sudden and awful realization that now they must hang, must hang for a crime committed by others!

But a boy at eighteen can never be long absolutely without hope. Surely, surely the jury, the alcalde must see that this witness had lied, that all the witnesses against them had lied! They could not, they could not bring in a verdict of guilty! They could not sentence them, Thure Conroyal and Bud Randolph, to be hanged! Hanged! The

thought stung them into life; and Thure turned wildly to the alcalde.

"It's a lie! a lie!" he cried. "It is all a lie! They know it is a lie! You surely must believe us! We did not kill the miner! We tried to save him! In spite of all their lies, you must believe us! We are only two boys, two boys without a friend to help us! We can not fight against their cunning! It is our word against their word! Look at us! Look into our faces! Do we look like boys who would kill a man? Look into the faces of our accusers! Think, we have fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters! Oh, you can not hang us, you can not hang us! You must believe us!"

"My boy," there was a solemn sternness in the voice of the alcalde as he spoke, "if you are guiltless of the crime charged against you, then, may God have mercy on us and on you! But I, the jury, the men gathered here can only judge of your guilt or innocence by the evidence presented before us; and, according to that evidence, and not according to the dictates of hearts that may be touched by your youth and seeming innocence, must the verdict be rendered. Gentlemen of the jury," and he turned to the jury, "the evidence has now all been laid before you; and it now becomes your duty to determine the guilt or the innocence of the prisoners. May the great God of justice and mercy direct your judgment aright; and cause you to bring in a verdict in accordance with the real truth!"

CHAPTER XII

HAMMER JONES

THE jurymen at once gathered about the foreman; but the consultation was brief. In less than ten minutes the foreman signified that the verdict was ready.

"Sheriff," the alcalde's lips were tight-drawn and his face whitened as he spoke, "bring the prisoners forward to hear the verdict of the jury."

The jury now stood together in line, on the right of the alcalde. The foreman stood a pace in front of this line.

The sheriff led Thure and Bud directly up in front of the line and within a couple of paces of the foreman; and there he halted the prisoners to await the giving of the verdict.

For a minute there was absolute silence, as the prisoners stood thus before the jury. The surrounding crowd forgot to breathe. It seemed, for a moment, as if the alcalde could not ask the fateful questions; but, at last, his tight-drawn lips parted.

"Gentlemen of the jury, are you ready to render your verdict?" he asked.

"We are ready," answered the foreman.

"Gentlemen of the jury, you may state your verdict."

The foreman's eyes faltered and turned from the faces of the prisoners.

"Guilty of the crime as charged," he said, and closed his lips tightly, and turned his head away.

The great crowd breathed again; and an ominous, deep-toned, shuddering murmur arose from its depths, as all eyes turned toward the alcalde. It now became his duty to sentence the prisoners; and, in accordance with the verdict just rendered, he could pronounce but one sentence—hanging.

For a full minute the alcalde stood straight and silent. He realized to its full the awful irrevocableness of the sentence he was about to pronounce, and a shuddering horror shook his soul. Never before had he felt like this when pronouncing a similar sentence. The sight of those two, white, staring, boyish faces had unmanned him—yet he must do his duty.

"Thure Conroyal, Bud Randolph—" His voice was clear and firm and the eyes he turned on the prisoners stern and steady—"a just and impartial jury have found you guilty of the horrible crime of murder; and it now becomes my awful duty to pronounce your sentence. Stand forth and receive your sentence."

As Thure and Bud turned their white faces toward the alcalde and stepped forth to receive their sentence, a man, almost a giant in size, who had just

pushed himself through the crowd to the inner edge of the circle, uttered an exclamation of surprise and horror; and, the next instant, he had flung the men still standing between him and the open space around the alcalde and the prisoners violently to one side, and, almost in a bound, had reached the side of the alcalde.

"Great God in heaven, alcalde!" he roared. "What does this mean?" and he stared from the face of the alcalde to the faces of the two boys, into whose dulled eyes had suddenly leaped a great light at the sight of the big man.

"Murder and hanging," answered the alcalde sternly. "The prisoners have had a fair trial; the jury have pronounced them guilty; and I am about to sentence them to be hanged."

"Murder! Hanged!" and the utter, unbelieving astonishment on the face of the big man was good to see.

"It's a lie, a lie! We never killed the man! Oh, Ham, we never killed the man! You, surely, will believe us!" and Thure and Bud both, with faces white with excitement and hope, sprang eagerly to the side of the big fellow.

"Shut up! Stand back!" and he pushed the boys away. "See here," and he swung around in front of the alcalde, "you know me; an' you know I'd never try tew save th' neck of no crim'nal. But I know them boys, know their dads an' mas; an' I know they never committed no murder. Who seen

'em dew it? Whar are th' witnesses?" and his eyes glared around the circle of tense faces.

"There they stand, Ham," and the alcalde pointed to the three witnesses, who at the sudden appearance of Hammer Jones, the big friend of the two boys, had involuntarily come together, as if for mutual defense; "and each one of the three swore positively that he saw the boys kill the man."

"Huh!" and, almost in a stride, Hammer Jones stood directly in front of Bill Ugger; and, the instant his eyes looked closely into the face of the man, his own face went white with wrath.

"Hello, Greaser Smith!" and the great hand fell on the shrinking shoulder and gripped the coat collar tightly. "So you're one of th' skunks that's a-tryin' tew git them tew boys hanged, be you? Rekerlect that time down in Sante Fé, when you was a-goin' tew skin a nigger alive, an' wanted tew kill tew boys for interferin'? Still up tew yur boyish tricks, I see. Wal, I've still got th' same big foot that kicked you intew th' mudpuddle; an' th' same big fist that smashed that nose of yourn when you was a-tryin' tew kiss a Mexican gal against her will. An' now you're a-tryin' tew have tew innocent boys hanged for a murder that you probably did yurself," and Ham's eyes flamed. "You cowardly skunk!" and, suddenly letting go of the coat collar, he took a quick step backward, and swung up his great fist with all the strength of his powerful right arm, striking the man squarely under the chin. The

force of the blow lifted Ugger, alias Greaser Smith, off his feet and hurled him to the ground as senseless as a log.

"Now, we'll have a look at th' other witnesses," and Ham turned to the cringing Quinley.

"Never seed you afore," he declared, as he looked into the pock-marked face of the trembling man, whose terrified eyes were fixed on the huge fist that had so summarily dealt with his big partner. "Wal, you are a likely lookin' cuss tew be th' side partner of Greaser Smith. I reckon you tew pull tewgether like tew mules. I'll have sumthin' special tew say tew you 'bout this case, when I see who t'other witness is," and he turned to the man with the broken arm, who had been looking excitedly around, as if he were searching for an opening in the crowd through which to escape and who now stood with his back toward Hammer Jones.

"Here, you," and Ham caught him by the shoulder and whirled him around, "jest give me a sight of yur mug—wal, I'll be durned, if 'tain't Skoonly!" and Ham's eyes widened with surprise and the angry glint in them deepened, while the man under the grip of his big hand shook as if he had an ague fit. "Here's matter for the alcalde. Come," and he started toward the alcalde, dragging the man along with him.

So sudden had been Ham's appearance and so swift and unexpected were his actions, that, at first, the great surrounding crowd had stood and stared

at him in astonishment, making no move; but, by now, they were beginning to wake up to the fact that here was a man evidently bent on defeating the ends of justice; and an angry growl, the growl of a mob, a sound once heard that is never forgotten, rolled out from its midst. But there were many men in that crowd who knew Hammer Jones, who had hunted and trapped and fought Indians with him, who had seen him risk his life fearlessly to save a comrade's life, and who never yet had known him to do a dishonorable deed; and these men knew, that, if Hammer Jones said that the prisoners were innocent, he had good reasons for saying it, and they were ready to see that he had a chance to prove his statement; and cries of: "Hurrah for Ham Jones!" "Give him a chance to prove what he says!" "Hear! Hear! Hear! Ham Jones!" "He shall be heard!" mingled with yells of: "String him up along with the boys!" "Bust his head!" "He's trying to rescue the murderers!" and like cries of rage at this unexpected interference.

But, before these two opposing forces could come to a clash, a tall spare man, whose deep-set eyes, keen and piercing as a hawk's, shone out of a weather-bronzed face, pushed himself hurriedly through the crowd that was beginning to seethe around the open court-room beneath the great evergreen oak, and hastened to the side of the alcalde.

"What is the trouble?" he demanded in a quiet authoritative tone of voice.

The alcalde welcomed him with a glad smile of recognition; and, as briefly as possible, told him what had occurred.

The man turned quickly and the keen eyes glanced, with a violent start of recognition, for a moment into the faces of the two boys.

"My God, alcalde!" and he whirled about in front of the surprised alcalde, "you were about to make a terrible mistake! I know these boys well; and I know they never murdered a man.

"Men! Men! Hear me!" and he leaped lightly up on top of the barrel that stood in front of the alcalde, his singularly clear and penetrating voice reaching every ear in the crowd. "Men! Men! Hear me! A terrible mistake has—"

"It's Fremont!" shouted someone. "Hurrah for Colonel Fremont! The man who licked the Mexicans! The man who won California for us! Hurrah for Colonel Fremont!"

The name acted like magic in quieting the fast-growing turbulence of the crowd. There was not a man present who had not heard of the dauntless young explorer, the bold soldier, the recent conqueror of California, to whom more than to any other one man they owed the fact that the gold-diggings were in the territory of the United States; and all wished to see this remarkable man, all were ready to hear what he had to say. As suddenly as it had begun, the violence of the crowd ceased and all eyes were turned toward Fremont.

"Go ahead, Colonel!" shouted a rough voice. "Thar's enough of y'ur old men here tew see that you git a fair hearin'."

"Thank you, gentlemen," and Fremont bowed. "The alcalde tells me," he continued, after a moment's pause, "that you have tried those two boys," and he pointed to Thure and Bud, "for murder, have found them guilty, and were about to hang them. I know these two young men, your prisoners, well. I know their fathers, their brothers, have known them for years; and so sure am I that you have made a terrible mistake, that I am ready, personally, to stand accountable for them until their innocence has been proven to your complete satisfaction."

"But, three men swore that they saw the prisoners kill the man, Colonel!" called someone from the crowd. "This has been no mob trial; but a regular court trial by jury; and the jury found them guilty, unanimous."

"Where are those witnesses? Let us have a look at them?" demanded Fremont.

"Here's one on 'em, Colonel," and the huge frame of Hammer Jones loomed up in front of Fremont, with the trembling Skoonly still in the grip of his right hand. "I swun, but I am glad tew see you right now," and quickly shifting Skoonly to his left hand, he extended his right to Fremont.

"Ham, Hammer Jones!" and Fremont gripped the extended hand with glad cordiality. "It's like old times to see your face again. But this is no

time for idle talk," and his fine face hardened. "So that is one of the witnesses against Thure and Bud," and his piercing eyes looked searchingly into the face of Skoonly. "What did he swear to?" and Fremont turned quickly to the alcalde.

"He swore," answered the alcalde, "that he saw the prisoners kill the man three days ago in the Sacramento Valley—"

"Three days ago!" snorted Ham wrathfully. "He saw th' prisoners kill a man three days ago in th' Sacermento Valley! Not unless he's got a double-barreled long-shot gun ahind him that can shoot his body clean from Hangtown tew th' Sacermento Valley in less time than I could take a chaw of ter-backer; for three days ago I seen this identickle man, Skoonly, run out of Hangtown for tryin' tew steal th' gold-dust of a sick miner. S'cuse me for interruptin'," and Ham turned his eyes, still glinting with his honest wrath, to the alcalde.

"What!" and the alcalde's eyes brightened and his whole face lightened, as if a great load had been suddenly lifted off his soul. "You saw this man run out of Hangtown three days ago! The very time that he swore he was on his way from San Francisco to the diggings! The very day that he swore he saw the prisoners kill the miner in the Sacramento Valley!"

"Right. He sart'in was in Hangtown three days ago. I reckon I otter know, seein' I was one on 'em tew help run him out. Ay, Skoonly," and Ham

l jerked the cringing man around in front of the alcalde. "Now, what might be th' trouble with that arm?" and he glared down at the bandaged arm of Skoonly, who had submitted to all these indignities, almost without a protest. He knew Hammer Jones.

"He said," answered the alcalde, "that his horse threw him and broke his arm a little while before he saw the murder committed and that that was why he had not gone to the help of the miner."

"Huh!" and again Ham snorted scornfully, then a sudden gleam came into his eyes, and he turned quickly to the alcalde. "Supposin'," he grinned, "you have that broken arm investigated. 'Twouldn't s'prise me none tew find it a durned good arm yit."

"Good!" and the alcalde smiled. "Skoonly can't object, because it will be a strong point in his favor, if we find the arm really broken."

"But I do object," protested Skoonly emphatically, his face becoming livid. "Th' pain'll be sumthin' awful; an' doc said that it mustn't be taken out of the splints for a month on no account."

"Objection overruled," declared the alcalde, who had been watching the man's face. "Here," and he turned to the foreman of the jury, "this appears like a proper point for you to investigate. I'll turn him over to you. Be careful and not hurt the arm any more than you are compelled to," and he smiled.

The crowd, which by this time had formed a

close and deeply interested circle around the dramatic characters in the little drama that was here being enacted, watched with tense and grim faces, the foreman, aided by a couple of his fellow jurymen, slowly unwind the bandages from Skoonly's arm. If they had been fooled, if they had been led by false testimony almost to hang two innocent men, nay, boys, their wrath against the false accusers would be sudden and terrible.

Skoonly yelled and squirmed, when they began unwinding the bandages from his arm, as if the action caused him the most intense pain, and begged them to stop, while his face grew so white that even Ham himself began to fear that the arm, at least, bore no false testimony; but the unwinding went steadily on.

And, lo and behold! when the last bandage was off, there lay the arm, sound of bone, and without even a bruise or discoloration along its whole length!

"Wal, I'll be durned! Jest as I thought! The cur! An' that is th' kind of evidence you was a-go-in' tew hang them boys on!" and Ham's angry eyes swept the circle of surrounding faces.

A murmur, that swiftly swelled into a roar of hundreds of angry voices, broke from the surrounding crowd, when Ham's testimony and the result of the examination of Skoonly's bandaged arm became known.

"A rope! Get a rope! Hang him!" yelled a

hoarse voice; and the cry was taken up by hundreds of voices; and the jam of enraged men pressed closer and closer to the cowering man, whose face grew livid with fear, as he glared wildly around, seeking some means of escape. But there was none; and despair and a great dread, the dread of a sudden and frightful death, took possession of his soul.

"Save me! Save me!" he yelled, throwing himself at Fremont's feet. "I did not mean tew git th' boys hanged. They, Bill an' Spike, told me 'twas jest tew scare them. They was a-tryin' tew frighten th' boys intew doin' sumthin' for them—Oh-h-h, don't let them git me! Save me!" and he clutched Fremont's legs with both his quivering hands, as the roar of the crowd became louder and more threatening.

"Quick," and Fremont bent over him, "will you tell all, all that you know of this horrible affair, if we will save your neck?"

"Yes! Yes!" eagerly agreed the terror-stricken man. "I'll tell ever'thing! Afore God I'll tell ever'thing! It's Bill an' Spike who is responsible, not me. It's them you want."

"Men," and Fremont again leaped up on top of the barrel, both hands outstretched for silence. "Listen, men, listen!"

For a minute the roar of the crowd continued, and then swiftly subsided, as all eyes caught sight of the tall figure of Fremont standing on the barrel top.

"Make your words few and to the point, Colonel. This is no time for speech-making," warned a voice from the crowd. "We want to get hold of the skunk who was willing to falsely swear away the lives of two boys."

"My words will be few and to the point," Fremont began, his clear penetrating voice reaching every ear in the crowd. "Skoonly will confess everything, if you will spare his neck. He appears to have been but the tool of the other two men; and we will need his testimony to make out a case against them and to prove to the satisfaction of all, the innocence of the two boys. Under these circumstances, it would seem to be best to allow him to go free, providing he makes a clean breast of everything he knows concerning this case."

"And further providin'," supplemented Ham, "that he be warned never ag'in tew show his cowardly face in Sacremento City or any minin'-camp in Calaforny, under penalty of instant hangin'."

"An' that he be given a hoss-licken, jest afore lettin' him go," added a roughly dressed miner, standing near the inner edge of the circle.

Growlingly, like a hungry dog driven from a bone, the crowd at length agreed to this disposal of Skoonly; and the wretched man, with much faltering and many terrified glances around the enclosing circle of grim faces, told how, for a thousand dollars in gold-dust, he had agreed to help

Quinley and Ugger out with his testimony, if they needed it; how he and the two scoundrels had planned out the whole thing the night before and were on the lookout for the boys that morning; how he had remained in a near-by saloon, with his manufactured broken arm all ready, waiting for a summons from the two men; and how, at last, the summons had come and he had given in his testimony, according to agreement. He declared that the two men had told him that they only wished to frighten the two boys into giving up something, he did not know what, that really belonged to them, and had assured him there would be no danger of getting the boys hanged, that they would be sure to yield before it got to that point. About the murder of the miner he knew nothing, except that Spike Quinley and Bill Ugger had told him that they had killed the man themselves, and had showed him the money-belt, still heavy with gold-dust, that they had taken from him—

“Great guns!” broke in Ham excitedly, at this moment, “if we ain’t plum forgot them tew villains,” and he made a mad break through the crowd in the direction of the spot where he had left Quinley and Ugger.

In an instant the wildest excitement prevailed; and hundreds of men were rushing about excitedly, looking for the two scoundrels. But Quinley and Ugger were wise in their wickedness, and seeing, with fear-enlightened eyes, the results of the ad-

vent of Hammer Jones and Colonel Fremont, had taken advantage of the excitement attending the examination of Skoonly, to disappear so suddenly and completely, that, although Sacramento City was searched all that day and that night, as with a fine-toothed comb, not a sign nor hair of either man could be found; and the enraged crowd had to be satisfied with giving Skoonly the promised "hoss-licken," and running him out of town the next morning, with a warning never to show his cowardly face on their streets again, unless he was looking for the job of dancing the hangman's horn-pipe at the end of a rope.

The excitement and the confusion and the swift scattering of the crowd, attending the search for the two scoundrels, of course ended the trial of Thure Conroyal and Bud Randolph for the murder of John Stackpole; and they stood free and worthy men in the sight of all people once more—and with the skin map still in their possession.

"Great Moses! but I was glad to see you, Ham!" declared Thure, as he gripped his big friend's hand, after some of the excitement had quieted down.

"Glad! Glad is no name for my feelings, when I saw your great body loom up by the side of the alcalde," and Bud gripped his other hand.

"I reckon you was some pleased tew see me," grinned back Ham, "both on you," and the hearty grip of his big hands made both boys wince.

"Colonel, Colonel Fremont!" and Thure broke

away from Ham's hand to rush up to Fremont, who was talking with the alcalde. "I—we can never thank you enough for coming so splendidly to our help."

"Then do not try," smiled back Fremont. "My boy," and he gripped Thure's hand, as his face sobered, "I have not forgotten a certain night, some three years ago, near the shores of Lake Klamath, when an Indian stood with bow bended and arrow aimed at my breast; nor the skill and quickness of the boy, whose bullet struck and killed the Indian before his fingers could loose the arrow.¹ I fancy that I have not yet discharged my full debt to that boy."

"That—that was nothing," stammered Thure, his face flushing with pleasure to think that Fremont still remembered the incident. "But this— Think of the terrible death you helped save us from!" and Thure shuddered.

"Yes, it was terrible," and Fremont's eyes rested kindly on the face of the boy, "but, think no more about it now," he added quickly, as he saw how swiftly the color had fled from his face at the thought of the dreadful peril he had just escaped. "Come," and he turned briskly to Ham, "I wish you, and the two boys, and the alcalde, if he will do us the honor, to dine with me. I have an hour at my

¹ A full account of this incident, the saving of Fremont's life by Thure, is given in the preceding book of this series, *Fighting with Fremont*.

disposal before I must leave the city; and I know of no better way of spending it than in your company. Besides, I am hungry, and I am sure you are, also, after all this excitement, now happily over. So, fall in," and he smiled, as he gave the once familiar command.

The alcalde begged to be excused, on account of other matters that demanded his immediate attention; but Ham and the two boys, with answering smiles on their faces, "fell in"; and, under the command of Fremont, charged down on the City Hotel, where their generous host entertained them lavishly on the costly viands of that expensive hostelry, while he and Ham talked of old times, of the perils and hardships and joys they had shared on those wonderful exploring expeditions that had brought a world-wide fame to the then young lieutenant, and the two delighted boys listened, until it became time for Colonel Fremont to go.

"Our dads will never forget what you have done for us, Colonel," Thure said, as he grasped Fremont's hand in farewell.

"I may soon put them to the test," smiled back Fremont, "by giving them an opportunity to vote for me, when we get our state government organized."

"You sure can count on all our votes," declared Thure eagerly; "that is, as soon as Bud and I are old enough to vote."

"Thank you," laughed Fremont, and added

quickly, his face sobering. "And it is an honor to any man to receive the votes of men like your fathers and Ham here and you two boys, even in prospect, an honor, that, believe me, I appreciate," and the light in his forceful eyes deepened, as if he were seeing visions of the future. "But, I must be off. Remember me to your fathers and to all the others," and he sprang lightly on to the back of his horse, near which he had been standing during these words, and galloped off down the street toward the ferry.

CHAPTER XIII

EXPLANATIONS

“WAL, now,” and Ham turned a puzzled and frowning face on the two boys, the moment Colonel Fremont had vanished down the street, “what are you tew yunks a-dewin’ in Sacramento City? A-tryin’ tew git yur necks stretched, you blamed idgits? I’ll be durned, if I wouldn’t like tew spank both on you!” and the frown on his face deepened. “I—”

“Oh, Ham,” broke in Thure excitedly, “we’ve got the most wonderful story to tell! And it all comes from that murdered miner, who, before he died, told us about a wonderfully rich mine that he had discovered; and it was to get the map to this mine that those two dreadful men tried to get us hanged—”

“Whoa—up! Jest pull up y’ur hosses a bit,” and Ham stared in astonishment at the excited boy. “You’re a-goin’ tew fast for me tew keep up. Come ’long back intew th’ hotel, an’ tell me y’ur story straight, not in jerks an’ chunks,” and he led the way back into the City Hotel, and to a quiet corner in the big waiting-room, where they could talk undisturbed and unheard.

Here, in low but excited voices and after exacting promises of the utmost secrecy, Thure and Bud told their wonderful story to Ham.

"Wal, I'll be tee-totally durned, if it don't sound good!" declared that worthy, when, at last, the tale had been completed. "But thar's lots of mighty good soundin' yarns goin' 'round camp, 'bout wonderful gold mountains an' caves of gold. Howsomever, I never heer'd tell on anybody's really findin' any on 'em; an', I reckon, 'most on 'em is jest lies. But that thar map seems tew give y'ur yarn a look like th' truth; an', I reckon, them tew skunks must have believed th' yarn, or they wouldn't have ben so pow'ful anxious tew git th' map. Gosh, if it should prove true!" and Ham's eyes widened and his cheeks flushed and he drew in a deep breath. "I'll be durned, if it should prove true, if I don't go back tew my old home in Vermont, that I ain't seen since I was a yunk 'bout y'ur age, an' buy up th' old farm, an' build a big house on it, an'—Gosh, a'mighty, if that yarn of y'urn ain't sot me tew dreamin'!" and Ham came back to the earth, looking a bit foolish. "More'n likely it's all a lie; an' thar I was a buyin' farms an' a-buildin' houses! Queer how th' gold gits intew th' blood an' makes all humans tarnal idgits, now ain't it?" and he shook his head wonderingly.

"But, there's the map, and the big gold nugget, and all the gold that the murderers got from him," protested Thure. "He must have found some kind

of a mine to have got that gold; and crazy folks wouldn't draw real maps of the gold-diggings they only imagined they had discovered."

"An' you've got that map, an' that hunk of gold with you?" and again the eager light shone in Ham's eyes. "Wal, I reckon I'd like tew have a look at that nugget an' map."

"But, not here," interjected Bud anxiously, as he glanced suspiciously around the big room at a number of roughly dressed men, who were standing in front of the bar or seated at tables playing cards. "I think that we had better wait until we get to our dads, before we show up the map and the nugget. We can't be too careful. Now, how comes it that you are in Sacramento City, Ham?" and the eyes of both boys turned inquiringly to the face of their big friend.

"Reckon you're right 'bout th' map an' nugget," admitted Ham reluctantly. "Leastwise I don't blame you for bein' some keerful after y'ur late experience," and his own eyes glanced sharply about the room. "Now, as tew my bein' here, that's soon explained. Y'ur dads an' th' rest sent me in tew git a load of camp-supplies—flour, bacon, sugar, coffee an' sech like things tew eat, 'long with some diggin' tools an' extra clothin'. Got in a leetle afore noon; an', heerin' thar was a murder trial on in th' hoss-market, I hit th' trail for th' market tew once, bein' some anxious tew see who was a-goin' tew have their necks stretched. Wal, if I

didn't 'most have tew push my heart back down my throat with my fist, when I seed that you tew yunks was th' criminals!"

"But you made things hum, when you got started," and the eyes of Bud glowed with admiration, as they rested on the face of his big friend. "You just straightened things out in no time. My, but it did do me good to see you give Brokennose that punch on the jaw!"

"Same here," grinned Ham. "But it riled me all up tew have them tew curs git away. If ever I lay my eyes on either one on 'em ag'in," and his eyes glinted savagely, "thar won't be no need of no rope tew hang 'em, th' cowardly murderin' skunks!" and he banged his great fist down on the table so hard that nearly every one in the room jumped and turned their eyes curiously in his direction.

For a few minutes longer Ham and the two boys sat talking together, then Ham suddenly straightened up.

"Wal, if I ain't forgettin' all 'bout them supplies in th' excitement," he said, hurriedly rising. "Come on, yunks, I've got tew hustle an' make all them purchases afore night; for we've got tew git out of here afore sun-up tew-morrer," and Ham led the way out of the hotel, to where he had left a couple of sturdy little pack-horses tied to the trees, when he had rushed off to see the hanging.

An open space, under the overhanging branches of a huge evergreen oak, was now selected for the camp for the night; and hither Ham and the two boys brought their horses, and, after unsaddling and unbridling them, gave them a scanty supply of grass, bought at fifty cents a big hand full, and a little barley, at a dollar a quart. Then Bud, the two boys had drawn cuts to see who should stay, was left to watch the camp, and Ham and Thure started out to make the needed purchases.

The shops were crowded with men buying goods to take with them to the gold-mines, or diggings, as the mines were almost universally called, and paying for them with gold-dust, the name given to the fine particles of rough gold dug out of the ground, at the rate of about sixteen dollars to the ounce of gold. On every counter stood a pair of scales, with which to weigh the gold; and it was a curious sight to Thure to see these men, whenever they bought anything, pull out a little bag or other receptacle, take out a few pinches of what looked like grains of coarse yellow sand, and drop them on the scales, until the required weight was reached, in payment for the purchase. Ham, himself, had only gold-dust with which to make his payments; and it made Thure feel quite like a real miner, when he handed the little gold-bag to him and told him to attend to the paying, while he did the selecting of the goods needed.

By sundown all the purchases were made and carried to the camp and everything made ready for an early start in the morning.

After supper—they got their own suppers, all deciding that the food at the hotels was too rich for their blood, or, rather, pockets—Thure and Bud, boy-like, notwithstanding their weariness, wanted to take a little stroll about the town; but Ham promptly and emphatically vetoed any such a move on their part.

“I’ll be durned if you dew!” he declared decisively, the instant the subject was broached. “You’ll stay right here in camp, an’ crawl intew y’ur blankets, an’ git tew sleep jest as quick as th’ good Lord’ll let you. You shore have had all th’ excitement you need for one day; an’ th’ devil only knows what trouble you’d be a-gettin’ intew, if you was allowed tew run loose, promiscus like, about th’ streets of Sacermonto City at night. It’s bad enough by day, as you sart’in otter know; but by night! Not for tew yunks like you!” and Ham shook his head so decidedly and frowningly that neither boy ventured even a word in protest against his rather arbitrary decision.

But, although they remained in camp, Thure and Bud never forgot that first night in Sacramento City. The scenes about them were so unique, so weirdly and romantically beautiful, so suggestive of dramatic possibilities, that they impressed themselves indelibly on memories new to such sensations.

As the sun went down a gray chill fog arose from the river and the lowlying shores and fell down over the little city like a thin wet veil, blurring and softening and reddening the light from the innumerable camp-fires, built under the dark shadows of overhanging trees, and the broad glows coming from canvas houses and tents, lighted from within, and the bright glares that poured through the doors and windows of the more brilliantly illuminated dance-halls and gambling-hells, giving to all a weird and dream-like aspect, fascinating, romantic, and beautiful.

Their camp was situated some distance from the center of the city's activities; but near enough for the sounds of its wild revelries to reach their ears, softened a little by the distance. A dozen or more bands were playing a dozen or more different tunes from a dozen or more different dance-halls, all near together along the levee and the neighboring streets; and, sometimes, high above even these discordant sounds, rose the human voice, in loud song, or boisterous shout, or peals of rough laughter. Around some of the near-by camp-fires men had gathered and were singing the loved home melodies; and from one of these groups came the voice of a woman in song, sounding singularly sweet and entrancing in the midst of all those harsher sounds. Above their heads a gentle wind blew murmuringly and whisperingly through the wide-spreading branches of the evergreen oak; and, at their feet,

snapped and crackled the ruddy flames of their own camp-fire.

By nine o'clock the lights of the surrounding camp-fires began to grow dimmer, and the songs and the laughter and the talking of the groups around them ceased. All these were seeking their beds or blankets; and soon only the noise and the music, the songs and the shouts of the revelers broke the stillness of the night.

For a little while, before closing their eyes in sleep, Thure and Bud lay in their blankets listening to these distant sounds of wild revelry.

Suddenly, above the music, above the songs and the shouts and the laughter, rang out the sharp—crack—crack—of two pistol shots, followed by an instant's lull in the sounds; and then the music, the songs, the shouts, and the laughter went on, louder and madder than ever.

At the sound of the pistol shots both boys had leaped out of their blankets and stood listening intently; but Ham had only grunted and rolled over in his blanket.

"Ham! Ham! Did you hear that?" called Thure excitedly. "Someone must have been shot!"

"Shut up, an' crawl back intew y'ur blankets," growled Ham. "'Tain't none of our bus'ness, if some fool did git shot. It's probably some drunken row. Whiskey's 'most always back of every shootin' scrap. It beats me," and the growl deepened, "how full-growed men, with full-growed

brains, can put a drop of that stuff intew their mouths, after they've once seen what it does tew a feller's interlect, makin' a man intew a bloody brute or a dirty beast or a grinnin' monkey; an' yit, th' best an' th' wisest on 'em goes right on drinkin' it. It shore gits me! Now," and he turned his wrath again on the two boys, "git right back intew y'ur blankets, an' shut y'ur mouths an' y'ur eyes, an' keep 'em shut till mornin'," and once again and with a final deep rumbling growl, he rolled over in his blanket and lay still.

Thure and Bud crawled slowly back into their blankets; and, at last, with the sounds of the distant revelry still ringing in their ears, fell asleep.

CHAPTER XIV

THE LUCK OF DICKSON

THE next morning, a good hour before sunrise, Thure and Bud found themselves suddenly tumbled out of their blankets and the grinning face of Ham bending over them.

"Sleepyheads!" and, reaching down, he gripped each boy by his coat collar, the night had been chilly and both had slept in their coats, jerked him to his feet and shook him violently, "Wake up!" and, suddenly letting go, he sent both boys staggering from him. "Thar, them's my patented double-j'inted yunk-wakers," and he shook both of his big fists in the faces of the two boys, "warranted tew wake th' soundest sleepin' yunk that ever rolled himself up in a blanket, in seven an' three-quarters seconds by th' watch, or money refunded. For testimonials, see Bud Randolph and Thure Conroyal," and the grin broadened on his face, until it threatened to engulf all his features.

"It sure does the waking all right," laughed Thure; "and you can have my testimony to that effect any time you wish it."

For an hour all hands were busy, getting the breakfast, eating, packing and saddling and bri-

dling the horses; and then, just as the sun, like a great globe of gold, rose above the gold-filled mountains of their hopes to the east and shone down on the waters of the Sacramento, Ham gave the word to start, and, leading one of his well-loaded pack-horses on either side of him, he strode off, headed for the rough trail to Hangtown, followed by Thure and Bud, driving their pack-horses before them.

As they passed along by the various camps in the outskirts of the town, a man, holding a long-handled frying-pan over the coals of his camp-fire, looked up and then remarked casually:

"Queer shootin' scrap that down on the levee last night!"

"Heer'd th' shootin', but that's all I heer'd," answered Ham, halting for a moment. "What might thar be queer 'bout it?"

"Both on 'em bosum friends 'til they gits a lot of French Ike's whiskey down 'em. Then one calls t'other a liar, an' both on 'em pulls their guns an' shoots; an' both on 'em falls dead, th' bullets goin' through th' heart of each one on 'em," answered the man.

"Hump! Nuthin' queer 'bout that!" grunted Ham. "That's a common thing for whiskey tew dew. Git up!" and he continued on his way.

The trail to Hangtown, after leaving the Sacramento Valley, entered the rough and picturesque regions of the western slopes of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, where the traveling was slow and dif-

ficult, especially with heavily loaded pack-horses; and, although the distance from Sacramento City, as the crow flies, was scarcely more than forty miles, yet it was not until near the middle of the afternoon of the third day that our friends came in sight of the rude log cabins and tents of Hangtown. They had climbed to the summit of a particularly rough hill and had just rounded a huge pile of rocks, when Ham brought his pack-horses to a sudden halt.

"Thar's Hangtown," he said, and pointed down the steep side of the hill into what was little more than a wide ravine, where a number of rudely built log houses and dirty-looking tents lay scattered along the sides and the bottom of the declivity and men could be seen at work with picks and shovels, digging up the hard stony ground, or, with gold-pans in their hands, washing the dirt thus dug in the waters of the little creek that flowed through the bottom of the ravine.

"Hurrah!" yelled both boys, taking off their hats and swinging them around their heads the moment their eyes caught sight of the houses and the tents.

"At last we are where gold is being actually dug up out of the ground!" exclaimed Thure enthusiastically, a moment later, as he sat on the back of his horse, watching, with glowing face and eyes, the men of the pick and the shovel toiling below.

"It shore does have tew be dug up out of th' ground, at least th' most on it," agreed Ham, grin-

ning. "More diggin' than gold, th' most on us find."

"Oh, come! Let's hurry. I want to get to dad," and Bud started off down the hill excitedly, with Thure and Ham hurrying along behind him.

The side of the hill was seamed with small water worn gulches and strewn with rocks and the logs of fallen trees; and the trail down to the bottom wound and twisted and turned to avoid these obstructions, until it seemed to the impatient boys, that, for every step downward, they had to go a dozen steps to get around some gulch or huge rock or fallen tree; but, at last, they reached the bottom, and were actually on the very ground where men were digging gold out of the dirt.

"Now, where are our dads and the rest?" and Thure looked curiously and excitedly around him at the various groups of miners hard at work with their picks or shovels or pans or other washing machines. "I can't see anybody in sight that looks like them— Oh, there is Dick Dickson!" and he jumped excitedly off his horse and ran up to a miner at work near by, who was about to wash a pan of dirt, followed by Bud.

"Hello, Dick! Didn't know you in them clothes," and Thure held out his hand to the miner, whose only dress was a broad-brimmed hat, a red woollen shirt, and a pair of trousers.

"Glad to see you," and the miner set down the pan of dirt and gripped the hands of both the boys.

"Had to come to the diggings with the rest, did you? Well, it's hard work; but the gold is here!" and his eyes sparkled.

"Are you going to wash that pan of dirt, Dick?" and the eyes of Thure turned excitedly to the pan full of dirt that the miner had placed on the ground at the sudden appearance of the boys.

"Yes," answered Dickson, grinning; "and it's the first pan that looks like pay-dirt that I've taken out of my new mine over yonder alongside of that big rock," and he pointed to a huge rock that jutted up above the ground a couple of rods away, where the boys could see a pile of dirt that had been thrown out of a hole dug down close to the upper side of the rock; "and so I am just a little anxious to see how it pans out."

"Don't—don't let us keep you from washing it," and Bud's face flushed with excitement. "We, too, would like to see how it pans out, wouldn't we Thure?"

"You bet!" was Thure's emphatic rejoinder. "I hope we bring you good luck, Dick. Now, let's see how you do it."

"All right. I sure need some good luck. Well, here goes," and with hands that trembled a little with excitement, for the washing of that pan full of dirt might mean a small fortune, he bent and picked up the gold-pan.

The creek was only a few feet away and Dickson hurried thither, followed by the two eager boys,

while Ham, a good-natured grin on his face, stood guard over the horses.

Dickson first submerged the pan in the water and held it there until the dirt was thoroughly soaked, while with one hand he crushed and broke the larger lumps and stirred the mass with his fingers, until all the dirt was dissolved, and a great deal of it had been borne away, in a thick muddy cloud, by the current of the stream. He then tipped the pan a little, at the same time giving it a slight whirling motion, holding it with both his hands, which soon caused all the remaining dirt to float away in the water, except a little coarse black gravel that covered the bottom of the pan in a thin layer.

"Now," and Dickson straightened up, the pan in his hands, his face flushed with excitement, for already his eyes had caught the yellow glitter of gold, shining amongst the coarse grains of gravel, "we'll see how hard I've struck it," and he thrust his fingers down into the wet black gravel that covered the bottom of the pan, and moved them slowly about in it, bending his head down close to the pan, so that his eyes could catch every gleam of gold.

"Is there any ? Is there any?" and Thure, in his anxiety to see, almost bunted his head into the head of Dickson.

"Is there any! Whoop!" and Dickson let out a yell that nearly startled both boys off their feet. "Is there any! Just look there! And there!

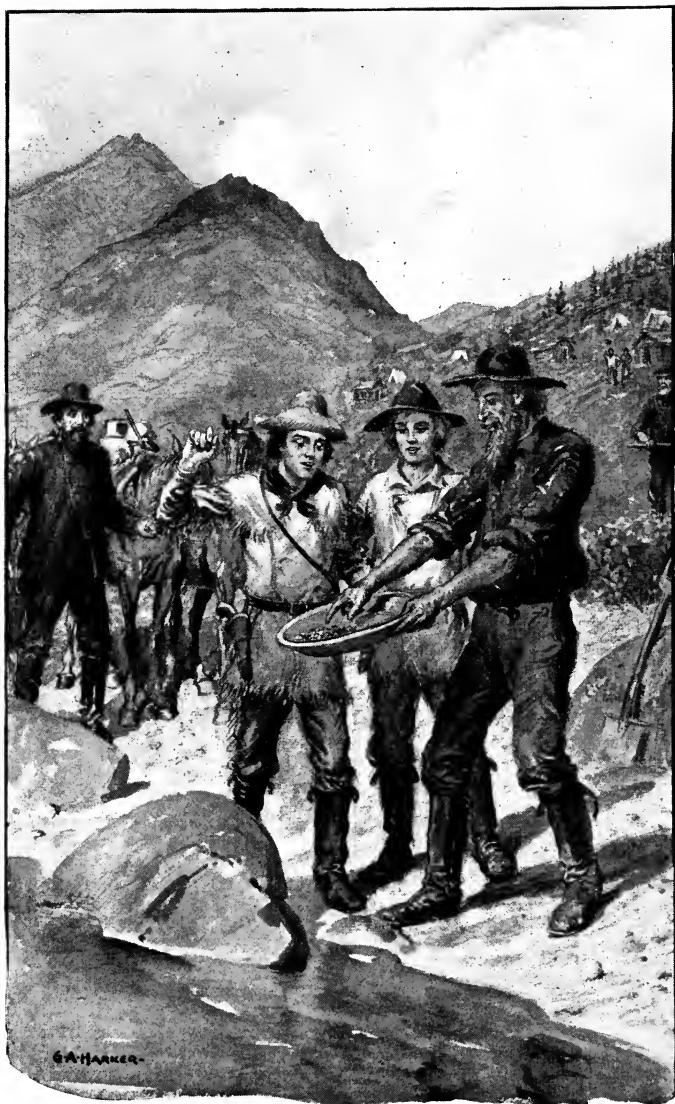
And there!" and with a trembling finger he pointed, as he spoke, to little rough bits of gold, a little larger than pin-heads, that fairly flecked with yellow the bottommost layer of black gravel.

Thure and Bud shouted with delight; and Ham and half a dozen of the miners at work near by came up on the run, the faces of all showing the liveliest interest.

"Whoop! I've struck it! Struck it rich, boys!" and the miner, almost beside himself with excitement, swiftly gathered the golden bits out of the pan and spread them out on the palm of his hand where all could see. "A good ten ounces!" he almost shouted, as he tossed them up and down to test their weight. "One hundred and sixty dollars! And out of the first pan full of pay-dirt! Gee-wilikins, but won't this be good news for Mollie!"

"You shore have struck it, Dickson," declared Ham, who, with glowing eyes, had been examining the bits of gold on the palm of the miner's hand. "I reckon thar's a pocketful of it where that comed from," and he glanced toward the big rock. "That thar rock acted like a big riffle an' stopped th' gold a-comin' down th' stream that hit ag'in it. I'm mighty glad you've hit y'ur luck at last," and the big hand of Ham went out in a hearty grip of the miner's calloused palm. "You shore deserve it, Dickson."

The congratulations of all were equally hearty and apparently free from envy; but Dickson was



"IS THERE ANY! JUST LOOK THERE! AND THERE! AND THERE!"

too eager to further test his discovery to wait long to listen to congratulation; and, hurriedly pocketing the gold, he grabbed up the pan and rushed back to his "mine" by the side of the big rock.

"Supposing we wait and see him wash out another pan of dirt," and Thure turned his flushed face and glowing eyes eagerly to Ham. "I never was so much interested in anything in my life."

"You shore have got the gold-fever an' got it bad," laughed Ham. "An', I reckon, you're not th' only boy hereabouts that is a-sufferin' with it," and he glanced at Bud's flushed face. "Wal, I'm some interested myself in seein' how Dickson's luck holds out; so we'll wait tew see the washin' of another pan."

In less than ten minutes the excited miner was back with another pan full of the precious dirt, which he at once began to wash, his nervous excitement being so great that the pan shook and trembled in his hands. Suddenly, in the midst of his washing, he jumped to his feet with a wild yell.

"A nugget! A nugget!" and he held aloft in one hand a little chunk of solid gold, about as large as an egg and nearly of the same shape, only rougher in outline.

By this time quite a little crowd of miners had gathered around the lucky man; and handshakes and claps on the shoulders and verbal congratulations were showered on him from all sides, while the nugget was passed from hand to hand, with

many wise and otherwise comments as to its weight and probable value and the likelihood of there being others like it where it came from. In the excitement caused by the finding of the nugget, the remaining dirt in the pan was forgotten, until Ham, suddenly remembering, turned to the excited Dickson.

"Better finish cleanin' out th' pan, Dick," he said. "Thar's probably more gold in it."

"Gosh, if I didn't forget it!" and Dickson grabbed up the pan and began washing its contents with feverish haste.

In a few minutes he arose and held out the pan, his hands trembling.

"There! Just look there!" he cried, pointing to the glitter of gold in the black sand that covered the bottom of the pan. "If there isn't a good fifteen ounces of gold there, then I miss my guess!" and he broke into a happy laugh. "Well, boys, my luck has turned at last! And there is a little woman up there in that little log cabin that has got to know about it at once," and Dickson dropped the pan and started on the run up the side of the hill toward a little log house that stood in a cluster of pines half-way up its side, followed by cheers from the miners, who appeared to be almost as rejoiced over his good fortune, as if it had been their own.

All this had been very interesting and very exciting to Thure and Bud; but now that the climax

had been passed their thoughts turned at once to their fathers.

"Now," and Thure caught hold of Ham's coat sleeve, "now that we have seen how they get the gold from the ground, take us to our dads. We are more anxious than ever to get to them as quickly as possible."

"I'm pow'ful glad Dickson made that strike," Ham commented, when they were again on their way. "He's been workin' like a hoss for months, without hardly gittin' a sight of color; but he's had th' pluck tew keep a-diggin'. I reckon it's th' Leetle Woman up in th' cabin that's kept him a-goin'. She's pluck clean through an' has stood right by th' side of Dick, no matter what sort of luck fate dished out tew him. I shore am glad Dick has hit it for th' Leetle Woman's sake, as well as his own. Now, 'bout y'ur dads. That's their house up thar, 'bout a dozen rods beyond Dickson's. But, I reckon, we won't find none of 'em at home this time of th' day," and he turned his horses into a rude trail that wound up the side of the hill toward the little grove of pine trees, in which the boys could see the little cabin where Dickson lived and beyond that a larger log house.

During this time Dickson had been speeding up the hill, shouting and yelling the good news at the top of his voice as he ran. Suddenly the boys saw

the door of the cabin thrown open, and a woman rush out and run madly down the rough trail toward the miner, her long unconfined hair streaming out behind her.

"Whoop! I've struck it! Struck it rich, Mollie!" they heard Dickson yell, while from down the hill rang out cheer after cheer from the little group of miners now gathered about Dickson's find and watching the meeting between the lucky man and the "Little Woman," as nearly all the miners in Hangtown called Mrs. Dickson.

A few minutes later Dickson and the "Little Woman," hand in hand, like two happy children, ran past them on their way down to the wonderful find.

Thure and Bud, and even Ham, cheered and yelled as they ran by; and the woman turned her shining eyes in their direction and waved her free hand and shouted a welcome to the two boys.

"I shore am glad that Dickson made that strike," Ham again remarked, with something that looked suspiciously like moisture in his eyes. "He's a deservin' cuss; an' th' Leetle Woman's ben like a mother tew us all."

CHAPTER XV

AROUND THE SUPPER TABLE

HAM'S expectations were fulfilled; for they found the log house vacant, with a sign on the door that read: "BACK ABOUT SUN-DOWN."

"Wal, jest dismount an' unpack an' make y'ur-selves tew home. We'll git things all straightened out afore we start out tew hunt up th' delinquents," and Ham began unpacking his horses .

But Thure and Bud had to have a look inside the house, before they untied a rope or unbuckled a strap; and, the moment they dismounted, they rushed to the door and entered.

The house was a very rude affair—just four walls of logs, roughly fitted with an ax and laid one on top of the other to a height of seven feet, enclosing a space some twenty-five feet long by eighteen feet wide, with a bark roof, ground floor, a door cut through the logs in the middle of one side, and three windows, one in each side and one in the end opposite the fireplace. The fireplace was very roughly constructed of stones and sticks, plastered together with a clay-like mud, and with the chimney built entirely outside of the house.

The furniture was in keeping with the house. The table was the split halves of a log, cut about ten feet long and laid side by side, with their flat sides up, supported by four short posts driven into the ground near the center of the room. The chairs were blocks of wood, set on end, reënforced by a couple of old boxes and two miners' easy chairs, a unique production, made by cutting down an empty flour barrel to something of the shape of an armed easy chair and attaching two rockers to the bottom. The seats of these chairs were often lined and stuffed in good shape and had the comfortable feel and rock of the more costly chairs of civilization—and what more need a miner ask? Along the side of the room opposite the door ran a double tier of rude bunks, one side of the beds being supported by posts driven into the ground and the other by the logs of the wall. On the wall near the fireplace hung the frying-pans and the other rude cooking utensils; and in a corner were piled the bags, barrels, kegs, and boxes containing their camp supplies.

When you are told that this, at that time in Hangtown, was considered a rather luxurious style of living, you may be able to form something of an idea of the kind of style in which the average miner lived.

"Well, they don't put on much style, do they?" and the eyes Thure turned to Bud twinkled with excitement and interest.

"Don't they! Just feast your eyes on this!" and

Bud, dropping down into the soft seat of one of the "easy" chairs, leaned back comfortably and began rocking. "Now, if this isn't style and comfort, then I don't know what style and comfort are. Better try it," and he winked toward the other "easy" chair.

Thure at once profited by the suggestion.

"Well, I swun to goodness!" he declared, as he rocked back and forth in the novel chair, "if this doesn't beat mother's easy rocker for comfort. I reckon dad will have to make her one, when we get back home," and he grinned.

"Say," and Ham strode into the house, a bag of flour on one shoulder, a box of canned stuff under one arm, and a grin all over his face, "if you yunks think you've come up here tew dew nuthin' but tew set an' rock in y'ur dads' easy chairs, you've got another think comin' an' comin' quick. Now, git them packs off th' backs of y'ur hosses an' intew th' house. This ain't no Home of Cumfort for lazy yunks. Out with you!" and, dropping the bag of flour and the box in the corner, he started for the two boys.

Thure and Bud "outed" as fast as their four legs could take them; and soon were busy getting the packs off their horses and the goods into the house. When this had been done and the horses had been cared for, the sun was nearing the tops of the western mountains; and it was decided not to hunt up the "delinquents," as Ham called them, but to

await their return at the house; and, in the meantime, to prepare such a supper for them as seldom blessed a miner's eyes and excited his appetite, from the delicacies Mrs. Conroyal and Mrs. Randolph had sent in the packs of the boys. Then, in addition, Thure and Bud determined to try and give their fathers, who, of course, supposed the two boys were still at home with their mothers and sisters on the rancho, a little surprise. By keeping a sharp lookout down the trail they could be warned of the coming of the men in sufficient time to put their surprise in operation.

Accordingly they got everything in readiness, first by tying their horses out of sight behind a clump of bushes and removing every outward sign of their presence, and then by drawing the two easy chairs up close together in front of the door and placing one of the blocks of wood used as seats in front of each chair. When they saw their fathers coming, they would take their places in these chairs, lean back comfortably in them, place their feet at a comfortable angle on top of the blocks of wood, and, thus sitting cozily in the two easy chairs, be the first objects to meet their fathers' eyes on entering the house. They fancied that this unexpected sight might surprise the two men some; and they were not disappointed.

Fortunately for the success of their "surprise," Mr. Conroyal and Mr. Randolph led the little procession of miners that appeared a few minutes after

sundown, coming up the trail leading to the log house.

"Here they come!" cried Bud, who was stationed at the window overlooking the trail, the moment the men appeared in sight. "Hurry, Thure, and get into your chair."

The two boys quickly seated themselves in the barrel-rockers, perched their feet comfortably on top of the blocks of wood, leaned back comfortably into the hollows of their chairs, and fixed their eyes on the door, their faces shining with excitement.

At last the door was flung open and the big frame of Noel Conroyal, backed by that of Rad Randolph, appeared in the doorway.

For a moment both men stopped right where they were, and stood staring in blank astonishment at the faces of the two boys sitting in the two chairs.

"Walk right in," invited Thure, his eyes dancing.

"Yes, come right in and have supper with us," urged Bud.

For an instant longer the two men stood staring; and then both of them made a rush for the two boys; and, as they were almost instantly followed by Dill Conroyal, Thure's older brother, Rex Holt, Thure's cousin, and Frank Holt, Thure's uncle and the father of Rex Holt, you can imagine the excitement and confusion that reigned in that log house and how swiftly the questions flew back and forth for the next few minutes. The men had been away from their homes and their dear ones

for nearly a year now; and, naturally, were exceedingly anxious to learn what had been going on during their absence. Suddenly, when the excitement had quieted down a little, Mr. Conroyal's face clouded and something that looked very much like a frown gathered on his forehead, as he turned to Thure.

"But, young man," and the frown on his face deepened, "how comes it that you are here, against my express commands? I left you at home to care for your mother and sister and the rancho. Why have you deserted your trust?"

"Oh, dad," and Thure turned excitedly to his father, "the most wonderful thing has happened! We found a dying miner, who had been robbed and stabbed; and he, just before he died, gave us a map that tells us how to find a Cave of Gold that he had discovered; and mother, our mothers, thought you ought to know about it; and so we are here, to get you all to help find this wonderful Cave of Gold. The miner said that the bottom of the cave was covered with gold nuggets, just covered with them, dad."

"And he gave us one of the nuggets, a whopper!" broke in Bud.

"And your mothers were foolish enough to believe such an improbable tale and to send you here on such a wildgoose chase!" and something that began to look very much like anger darkened Mr. Conroyal's face. "Why, the camp is full of such

tales; but no sensible man ever pays any attention to them."

"But, dad, you haven't heard our story yet; and you haven't seen the map and the nugget," insisted Thure eagerly. "I am sure you will not blame us for coming when you know all."

"Well, my son," and Mr. Conroyal's lips tightened grimly, "we'll have a look at that map and nugget and hear that wonderful story of yours and then, if it doesn't look as if it might pan out true, back you will start for home at sun-up to-morrow morning. What do you say, Rad?" and he turned to Mr. Randolph. "The boys must be made to understand that they can't desert a trust like that at every wild tale they hear."

"Right," agreed Mr. Randolph. "They start back for home to-morrow morning, if their tale does not sound reasonable enough to make good their coming. They were all the men folks left that the women could depend on; and the reason must be a strong one to justify their deserting them."

"But, we did not desert them," expostulated Bud. "They gave us permission to come, told us to come, because they thought you ought to know about the Cave of Gold and the map, and there was no one else to send," and Bud's cheeks flushed a little with disappointment and indignation.

"Wal, now," and the good-natured face of Ham loomed up between the two boys, "I reckon, if you

all will jest take a look at that thar table, you'll stop y'ur talkin' and git tew eatin' some sudden. 'Tain't once in a dog's age that a miner in Hangtown can sot down tew a table like that," and Ham waved both hands proudly in the direction of the split-log table, on which he had spread out, with lavish hands, the cakes, pies, jellies, fruits, butter, eggs and the other good things sent from home, together with the results of his own more substantial cooking, fried bacon, nicely browned flapjacks, and steaming hot coffee.

"Whoop!" yelled Rex. "Me for the eat!" and, grabbing up one of the blocks of wood, he made a rush for the table, followed by all present.

That was a jolly supper. The sight of the unaccustomed good things to eat put everybody in good nature—and no wonder! for their eyes had not seen an egg or a cake or a pie or a hunk of butter, to say nothing of the jelly and the fruit, in Hangtown before for six months; and nobody knows how good these things look and taste, until they have been without even a smell of them for some months, and living on a steady diet of salt pork and beans and man-made bread. But, at length, as all good things will, the eating came to an end; and then, almost involuntarily, all eyes turned toward Thure and Bud. Their stomachs were filled; and now all were in the best possible condition to listen to their story.

“Now, for that dead miner’s wonderful tale,” and Conroy turned to Thure.

“Jest wait a minit afore you begin,” and Ham arose suddenly from the table. “We want no outside listeners tew this tale,” and, hurrying outside, he made a hasty circuit of the house, to assure himself that there were no eavesdroppers. When he came in he remarked, by way of answer to the inquiring glances turned in his direction: “You will know why I’m so cautious-like afore th’ yunks come tew th’ end of their tale; an’, I reckon,” and he glanced around the circle of somewhat startled faces that surrounded the table, “afore they begin, we’d better have it understood by all that thar is tew be no talkin’ outside ’bout this matter, that it’s tew be kept as close as our own skins tew ourselves. It has already caused th’ death of th’ old miner, an’ mighty nigh th’ death of them yunks thar, as you’ll soon larn, an’ death is still hot on th’ trail, so it’s jest good hoss-sense for us tew be cautious-like. We don’t want no more killin’s, if we can help it. Now, I reckon, you can begin y’ur yarn,” and, seating himself, he nodded his head to Thure and Bud.

You may be sure that, after these ominous actions and words of Ham, there was no lack of interest in the faces now turned toward the two boys.

Thure began the story; and, helped here and there by Bud and often interrupted by the angry

exclamations of his excited hearers, he told the remarkable tale, from the killing of *El Feroz* and the death of the old miner to their own startling arrest for murder in the streets of Sacramento City and narrow rescue from the hangman's rope by the providential coming of Hammer Jones and Colonel Fremont.

"And those two cowardly skunks got away!" almost yelled Conroyal, as he banged his big fist down on the table, his face white with wrath. "And after they had almost succeeded in getting two innocent boys hanged for a crime they committed themselves!"

"They sart'in did," answered Ham grimly. "An' what's more th' cunnin' devils like as not are still on th' trail of that thar skin map th' old miner gave th' boys. That's why I reckon we'll need tew be some cautious."

"But, where is this wonderful skin map and that big gold nugget?" cried Rex Holt, his eyes shining and his face flushing. "Let us have a look at them," and he jumped to his feet and leaned across the table, so as to be nearer to Thure.

"Dill, you and Rex just take a run around the house to see that the coast is still clear, before the boys show up the gold nugget and the skin map," and Mr. Conroyal glanced sharply toward the door and the windows. "As Ham says, we want no eavesdroppers in this case."

Dill and Rex at once sprang to the door; and,

moving in opposite directions, each slowly made the circuit of the house, their keen eyes searching the surrounding darkness. They neither saw nor heard anything suspicious.

"Now, we'll have a look at that map and gold nugget," Mr. Conroyal said, as soon as Rex and Dill had returned and reported the coast clear. "Of course," and he glanced around the circle of faces, "it is understood that all that is said and seen here to-night is to be kept secret by all, whether or not the search for the Cave of Gold is made."

"Yes, yes!" cried Dill impatiently. "We're all in on it together and must not breathe a word about it to an outsider. We all understand that, don't we?"

All the heads around the table quickly nodded assent.

"Now, then, let us have that map and gold nugget," and he turned excitedly to Thure and Bud.

Thure at once thrust his hand under the bosom of his shirt and under his left shoulder and pulled out the miner's little buckskin bag. Then he opened the bag and pulled out the map.

"The skin map," he said, and, laying it down on the table, he swiftly turned the bag upside down and dumped the gold nugget down on top of it. "And here is the gold nugget."

For a moment no one moved; but all sat staring at the big yellow chunk of metal, shining ruddily in the light of the flickering candles, as it dropped

from the bag and came to a rest on the skin map and lay there on the table in front of Thure.

"Gosh, that sart'in looks like th' real stuff!" and the big hand of Ham reached out and picked up the nugget and hefted it critically. "Solid gold!" he declared, his eyes shining. "Jest heft it, Con," and he passed the nugget to Conroyal. "Wal, I reckon you yunks have made good. Now, let's see what's on that thar piece of skin," and, picking up the map, he smoothed it out on the table and stared down on it, while as many heads as possible crowded close to his head and stared down on the map with him.

"John Stackpole, did anyone here ever hear of a feller by th' name of John Stackpole?" and Ham raised his head and glanced around.

"I know the man," declared Frank Holt, the father of Rex, whose snowy white hair gave him a patriarchal appearance. "I remember now. That's the name the fellow gave I saw in Coleman's store 'bout two weeks ago. He had a peculiar scar, shaped something like a horseshoe over one of his eyes."

"That's the man! You remember that queer-shaped scar over one of his eyes, don't you?" and Bud turned excitedly to Thure.

"Yes," answered Thure. "He must have just got back from the cave. What was he doing, Uncle Frank?" and he turned eagerly to Mr. Holt.

"Well, he certainly looked as if he had just come

out of a cave," grinned Holt. "Clothes all in rags and dirty, and hair and beard all over his head, except his eyes and nose and mouth. But," and his face lighted up, "he seemed to have plenty of gold-dust; for, while I was standing there watching him curiously, he picked out a good suit of clothes and paid for them out of a bag heavy with gold, gold that was mostly small nuggets.

" 'Struck it, pard,' and I saw Coleman's eyes glisten, as he gathered in them small nuggets, for the gold wasn't no Hangtown gold. Anybody with eyes could see that.

" 'Just a pocket,' answered the man. 'But good and rich, for a pocket.'

" 'Whereabouts might it be, if I ain't asking too much?' queried Coleman, who I could see was some excited over that bag full of little gold nuggets, as he placed the bundle of clothes down in front of the man.

" 'Thank you,' answered the man gruffly, and, picking up the bundle, he hurried out of the store, considerably to the disappointment of Coleman

"Now, I calculate, that must have been our man, for he certainly told Coleman that his name was John Stackpole, when he asked him if any message had been left there for him. I remember it all plain, because I got some excited over that bag full of little gold nuggets myself; but I didn't call to mind the name until Ham called it out."

For many minutes the map and the gold nugget

were now passed from hand to hand and thoroughly examined by all, while the tongues of all wagged with excited comments and Thure and Bud were often called upon to repeat parts of their story. But, at length, Noel Conroyal, who had been elected President of the Never-Give-Up California Mining Company, into which our good friends, the Conroyals, the Randolphs, the Holts, and Hammer Jones, had organized themselves, stood up and pounded on the table with his big fist.

"The Never-Give-Up California Mining Company will come to order," he said, the moment the talking ceased; "for the purpose of considering the matter laid before it by Thure Conroyal and Bud Randolph and to determine what action, if any, shall be taken."

"Oh, cut out the big talk, dad, and just let's talk it over together," protested Dill a bit impatiently; for, when Mr. Conroyal assumed the office and the dignities of the President of the Never-Give-Up California Mining Company, he was apt to be a little formal and long-winded. "We don't need the formalities and they take up time."

"All right, if that is the wish of the company," agreed Mr. Conroyal good-naturedly. "I only wanted to get to doing something besides talking."

"I think," declared Ham, "that, now that we've heer'd th' story an' seen th' skin map an' th' gold nugget, we'd better sleep on it afore we decide anything, 'specially seein' that it's gittin' late, an' all

on us, I reckon, are plumb tired; an' tharfore, I move that this here meetin' be adjourned 'til tew-morrer mornin', an' that all on us be ordered tew git intew our bunks an' go tew sleep."

Ham's suggestion sounded so sensible, for even the excitement could no longer keep their tired bodies and brains from calling out for rest and sleep, that it was adopted at once, with only a few feeble protests; and, in fifteen minutes from the time it was made the lights were out and all were in their bunks.

"Say, dad," queried Thure a bit mischievously, as he and Bud crawled under the blankets of one of the bunks, "do we have to start back for home at sun-up?"

"No, shut up and go to sleep," growled back Mr. Conroyal.

CHAPTER XVI

UNEXPECTED COMPANY

THE next morning everybody at the Headquarters of the Never-Give-Up California Mining Company was up an hour before the sun flashed its golden light over the tops of the eastern mountains and down on the log cabins and tents of Hangtown. All the workers in the mining-camps went to bed early, tired out with their hard day's work with pick and shovel, slept soundly, and arose early the next morning to begin another day of toil. Only the drones—the gamblers, the saloon-keepers, and their foolish patrons—burned the midnight oil, or, rather in this case, the midnight candle, for there was little oil to burn in these camps. Hence it was that when Thure and Bud hurried out of the house to wash their hands and faces in a near-by spring, they saw that they were far from being the only early risers, that the smoke was rising from the chimneys of nearly every log cabin in sight and that in front of nearly every tent glowed a camp-fire, around which the cooks already could be seen preparing breakfast.

“Well, this is great!” declared Bud, as he dashed

the cool, refreshing water over his face. "I feel like a new man already. There must be something in this mountain air that gets into the blood and puts new life into a fellow. Say, but isn't this a beautiful sight, like—like a picture painted by a great artist!" and his eyes swept over the surrounding scene, now just becoming visible through the light of the early dawn.

"You are right, it is a beautiful scene," and Thure stood up and allowed his eyes to drink in, with all the enthusiasm of youth, the beauties of the scene; "but, I reckon, there is no artist that can paint a picture the equal of that," and he pointed to the distant tops of the eastern mountains. "It takes the brush of God to paint that kind of pictures!"

And Thure was right. No artist's skill could transfer to canvas the full glories of such a scene as now delighted the eyes of Thure and Bud.

The first rays of the morning's sun flamed upon the snow-covered tops of the mountains towering high above their heads to the eastward, while the mountainsides and valleys were still dark with the shadows of night; and everywhere the flaming light of morning struck the crystal-white of the snow on mountain top and pinnacle, that peak was crowned with a glorious halo that glowed, first with grayish violet lights, swiftly changing to crimson and rose, and from rose to gold, until, suddenly, the whole peak blazed forth in the glorious light of the full-

risen sun. 'A vision for an artist to rhapsodize over; but for a God to paint!

"Bre'kfust! First an' last call tew bre'kfust!" yelled Ham from the open door of the house, just as the sun burst over the tops of the mountains.

"I feel as if I had just been to church," Thure said reverently, as the two boys started back to the house.

"So do I," agreed Bud. "Only no church or priest ever seem to bring God as close to a fellow as such a scene as that does. I don't see how anybody can live in the mountains and not believe in God."

As soon as breakfast was eaten, Mr. Conroyal arose.

"Now," he said, "that we have all had a night in which to think over the tale of the dead miner we had better get together and decide on what we had best do; and, as Dill suggested last night, we will first talk it over in an informal way. Now, what do you think about the truth of the miner's yarn? That, of course, is the first thing to settle; for there is no need of bothering with the matter at all, unless we feel quite sure that the miner really found a cave something like the one he described to Thure and Bud."

"Well, considering all things," and Frank Holt took the pipe he had lit and was puffing on out of his mouth and laid it down on the table, "and more especially considering the fact, that, when I saw

him in Coleman's, he appeared to have just got in from a long prospecting spell in the mountains and to have plenty of gold along with him, and gold of a different kind than is found anywhere around here, I feel quite certain that Stackpole's yarn about finding that Cave of Gold comes pretty nigh to being true, nigh enough at least to be worth investigating."

"Them's my sentiments right down tew a T," declared Ham emphatically. "Whar thar's ben so much smoke, thar's sart'in tew be some fire. I'm in favor of makin' a hunt for th' Cave of Gold; but, afore doin' it, I'd like tew know how that thar wing dam project over in Holt's Gulch is promisin' tew pan out. If 'twon't take tew long, I'd like tew see that job finished afore we have a try for th' Cave of Gold. I reckon we've all put tew many backaches an' armaches intew that dam tew want tew see 'em wasted; an' thar might be a wagon load of gold thar, an', if thar is, we want tew be th' ones tew git it, after all our work."

"Right, Ham's right," asserted Mr. Randolph. "Now, supposing we all go down and have a look at that dam, and try to figure out just about how much longer it will take to finish it, before we decide anything definitely about the hunt for the Cave of Gold. I feel almost sure that we are going to strike it rich there, and I'd hate like sin to see any one else reap where we've sown so many backaches, as Ham says."

"I think Rad has it about right," declared Mr. Conroyal, "and, if there are no objections, we'll all go down to Holt's Gulch and have a look at the wing dam. I fancy it wouldn't please none of us much, after working as hard as we have, to see somebody else step into our boots there and reap a fortune, as like as not they'd do, if we deserted the dam now. I reckon it won't take more than a week to finish the dam; and then a few hours will show whether or not we've struck pay-dirt."

There were no objections made to this proposition, although Rex and Dill and Thure and Bud grumbled a little over the prospect of having the hunt for the Cave of Gold delayed for a week; and, accordingly, all started for Holt's Gulch, so named in honor of its discoverer, Rex Holt.

The gulch was about two miles from Hangtown and was reached by passing up a deep and steep ravine, that split the side of the hill a little above Hangtown, for about a mile, and then up and over the side of the ravine and down into a narrow little valley, into which a little stream of water tumbled through a rent in the walls of rock that nearly enclosed the valley. This rent in the rocks was the entrance to Holt's Gulch; and the dam was being constructed something like half a mile farther up, where the gulch crooked about, like a bent elbow, and widened out a little.

Many of the miners were already at work when our little company passed up the ravine on their

way to Holt's Gulch, presenting scenes of the greatest interest and novelty to the unaccustomed eyes of Thure and Bud, as they dug for the precious metal, sometimes up to their knees in mud and water, sometimes so far away from the water that all the pay-dirt had to be carried on their backs to the creek and there panned, but always cheerful and hopeful that they "sure would strike it big soon."

"Now, what might those fellows be doing there? They look as if they might be winnowing wheat; but, of course, that can't be what they are doing," and Thure turned a puzzled face to Ham, as he pointed to where a small company of Mexicans, lank and skinny and black as Arabs of the desert, were gathering the loose dry dirt in large wooden bowls, tossing it up in the air, where the wind could blow away the lighter particles, and dexterously catching it again in their bowls, as it came down, or allowing it to fall on blankets or hides spread on the ground at their feet, in a manner very similar to the ancient method of separating the grain from the chaff.

"Them are a breed of Mexies called Sonorans," answered Ham; "an' they are a-throwin' that dirt up in th' air an' a-catchin' it ag'in tew git th' gold out of it. You see th' wind keeps a-blowin' th' lighter dirt out an' a-leavin' th' gold, 'cause it's heavier, until thar's nuthin' left but th' dirt what's tew heavy for th' wind tew blow away an' th' gold-

dust, which is cleaned by blowing th' heavy dirt out of th' bowl with th' breath. That way of git-tin' gold is called dry-washin'; an' is tew slow an' dirty for Americans or anybody else that's got much gump tew 'em; but them tarnal Mexies seem tew thrive on it. I reckon th' good Lord made 'em nearly black, jest so they could live an' work in dirt, without th' dirt showin' through much. That sort of thing would kill a white man in a week," and Ham looked his disgust.

"Say, but this gold-digging is no fun, no matter how you do it, is it?" and Thure's eyes swept up and down the ravine, where hundreds of men were toiling like ditch-diggers.

"Fun! Gold-diggin' fun!" and Ham grinned. "Th' feller what comes tew th' diggin's a-thinkin' that th' gold is a-goin' tew jump up right out of th' ground, 'cause it's so glad tew see him, is a-goin' tew git fooled 'bout as bad as Dutch Ike did, when he took a skunk for a new kind of an American house cat an' tried tew pick it up in his arms. Fun! No; gold-diggin' is jest grit an' j'int grease mixed tewgether an' kept a-goin' with beans an' salt pork an' flapjacks. But, we're gettin' ahind a-watchin' them dirty Sonorans. Come on," and the huge strides of Ham made Thure and Bud both trot to keep up with him, as he hurried after the others, to whom the dry-washing Mexicans were too common a sight to be worthy a moment's pause for the purpose of watching.

"Now, dad," and Thure turned inquiringly to his father, when, at length, all stood together in Holt's Gulch on the mound of dirt that had been already thrown up in building the wing dam, "I don't just see how this dam is going to help you find the gold."

"Well, my son," and Mr. Conroyal smiled, "it is not at all surprising to find that you do not know all about mining, seeing that you have been in the diggings only over night; but I'll give you the theory of the dam. This little stream of water, as you can see from where we stand, makes rather a sharp turn a few rods down, against an almost perpendicular wall of rock, forming a curve in the stream that can be likened to the crook in a bent arm, and leaving quite a little open space of ground almost on a level with the water in the bend of the arm. Now we've discovered that there is a deep hole right at the elbow joint, partly filled with gravel and big enough to hold a good many tons of gold, but too deep to get at through the water; and we've figured it out something like this. The gold found in all the diggings along the beds of rivers has been washed out of the rocks by the water and carried down by the current, until stopped by its own weight or some obstruction; and we calculate that most of the gold carried down by this stream would sink down into this hole and stay there, because, gold being so heavy, it would sure fall down into the hole, and, once there, the water would not be strong

enough to lift it out again. Now, that is the reason why we think there might be gold and lots of it in that there hole," and he pointed to the elbow made by the curve in the stream.

"But, of course, not being fish, we cannot get down into the hole to see whether or not there is gold in it, as long as the water runs over it; and so we are making this wing dam up here above the elbow, to turn the stream into a new channel and send it flowing kitti-corner-wise across the opening between the two arms of the elbow and back into its own channel below the elbow, which, of course, would leave the elbow dry and give us a chance to clean out the hole and get all the gold there is in it."

"Oh, I see now!" exclaimed Thure, his eyes beginning to shine with excitement. "And you call it a wing dam, because you have to make a sort of a wing to the main dam, extending for quite a ways out on the dry land, in order to give the water a sufficient turn to keep it from flowing back into the old channel until you are ready to have it."

"Exactly," and Mr. Conroyal smiled. "And, if the good Lord will only keep it from raining until we get the dam finished, all of us might make our fortunes right here; and, again, we might not find a cent's worth of gold. It's all a speculation," and he shrugged his big shoulders.

"But—but what difference could a little rain make? You are not afraid of getting wet, are

you?" and Thure smiled at the thought of these hardy men standing in dread of a little rain.

"No, son, we are not afraid of getting wet," and Mr. Conroyal smiled grimly. "But a big rain up there in the mountains where this stream comes from, would mean that in less than no time a flood of water would come a-tearing down this narrow gulch that would sweep our dam off its feet quicker than you could wink an eye—and us along with it, if we didn't get out of here about as lively as the Lord would let us. Howsomever we are not counting much on a rain, seeing that the dry season has got a fairly good start; but it might come," and his eyes turned a little anxiously toward the snow-covered mountains to the northeast, whence came the little stream of water running through Holt's Gulch. "But, come, we must get busy. Now, the first thing for us to do is to figure out about how much longer it will take us to finish the dam. I calculate that we have the dam about two-thirds done; and, since we have now been at work twelve days, I think we can count on finishing it in another six days."

"That's 'bout my idee, Con," agreed Ham. "Another six days otter see th' finish of th' job; an' then—maybe it will be gold an' maybe it will be jest a lot of durned hard work for nothin'; but it shore looks good; an' I'm in favor of seein' this dam through afore tacklin' th' Cave of Gold propersition."

For an hour or more our friends measured and figured and considered; and then, all coming to the conclusion that Mr. Conroyal's estimate of the time required to complete the dam was about right, the Never-Give-Up California Mining Company went into executive session, and, after again considering the marvelous tale of the dead miner and again examining the gold nugget and the skin map and again carefully weighing their chances of finding gold in the hollow of the stream's elbow after the turning of the water aside by the dam, the Company finally decided that the dam proposition looked too good to throw up, even for such an alluring project as the hunt for the wonderful Cave of Gold, especially since the Cave of Gold could not run away and would still be there waiting to be found after the dam proposition had been thoroughly tried out. Accordingly it was voted to first complete the dam and see if there was any gold in the old bed of the stream; and then, if it was still the wish of the Company, they would start on a hunt for the miner's Cave of Gold.

"That means for everybudy tew git busy tew once with pick or shovel," and Ham jumped to his feet and seized a pick the moment the result of the final vote was announced. "We want tew git this here dam built jest as soon as we can, an' find out what's in that thar hole; an' then, I reckon, we'll all want tew have a try for that thar gold cave, unless we gits enough gold out of th' hole

tew plumb fill us all up with gold," and Ham grinned joyously, as he struck the sharp point of his pick down deep into the hard dirt.

There was always the prospect of a big find in the near future to keep up the spirits of the gold-digger. What did his condition to-day matter to him, when to-morrow he might fill his pockets full of gold! When all he had to do was to shoulder his pick and shovel, pick up his gold-pan, and go out almost anywhere and dig enough gold out of the ground at least to live on! When every morning was cheered by the possibility of striking it rich before night, and the discouragements of every night were lightened by the thought that to-morrow might be his lucky day! The star of hope always brightened his darkest skies; and so long as he kept his health, he usually kept his courage and good-nature. Consequently the reader need not wonder at the joyous grin on Ham's face, when he began tearing up the earth with his pick; for every blow might be bringing him a step nearer to a fortune!

The building of a dam under any circumstances is hard and dirty work; but, when the only tools are picks and shovels, when all the dirt that cannot be thrown into place with the shovel, must be lugged there on the backs of the laborers themselves, as was the case with our friends, then, indeed, does the building of a dam become about as fatiguing work as a human being can undertake

to do, as Thure and Bud both discovered long before the night of their first day's work in the gold-mines of California came to bring rest to their aching backs and arms and legs. But that day saw the completion of the wing part of the dam and the new channel so far as it was thought necessary to dig one and now all that remained to be done was to extend the dam across the stream itself; and this progress put all, even the two boys notwithstanding their weariness, into splendid spirits.

"I reckon it won't take us th' hull six days tew finish th' job," commented Ham, as he threw down his pick and wiped his perspiring face with a huge red handkerchief at the close of the day's work. "We didn't calculate that you tew yunks was such hosses tew work," and he grinned into the faces of Thure and Bud; and the two tired boys grinned bravely back. They were not going to let anybody know just how very, very tired they really were.

That night, when the returning laborers came within sight of their log house, they were greatly surprised to see the smoke pouring hospitably out of its chimney and a light glowing a bright welcome through its windows.

"Now, who can it be!" exclaimed Ham, the moment his eyes caught sight of the smoke and the light, while all quickened their steps and their faces brightened; for company in that lonely log house

was such a rarity as to be most gladly welcomed. "Won't expectin' nobody, was you, Con?"

"No," answered Conroyal. "I can't imagine who it can be."

"Maybe it's th' minister an' his wife come tew make us a social-like call. Wal, he won't git no chicken dinner, if it is," and Ham grinned.

At the door of the house the mystery was solved by the sudden appearance in the doorway of the smiling face of Mrs. Dickson glowing with the heat of the fire over which she had been cooking and her own happiness, backed by the grinning countenance of her husband.

"Dick and I felt just as if we had to celebrate our good fortune someway, or bust," she explained, smiling and bowing to the astonished men; "and, of course, we didn't want to celebrate it all alone, so we just moved in here for the celebration, your house being larger than ours. Now, get washed up as quick as you can and come right in. Supper is almost ready; and Dick has bought out nearly all the stores in Hangtown. Thought you men folks might enjoy a taste of woman's cooking again," and her sweet laugh rang out joyously.

"Got everything good to eat they had in Hangtown, boys," and Dickson thrust his head out over one of his wife's shoulders; "and Mollie's cooked a dinner that just fairly makes a fellow's insides jump to get a whiff of. Whoop! I've taken a

good Ten Thousand Dollars' worth of gold out of that hole by the side of the big rock already! And there is more left there, boys! There is more left there!" and the happy man caught his wife around the waist and began waltzing with her around the table.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" was the way Ham expressed his feelings at this unexpected but most welcomed invasion of their home; and, judging from the looks on the faces of the others, that was about the way all felt.

Our friends promptly hurried away to the spring to "wash up," as the Little Woman had commanded; and soon were back again, with, probably, just a little cleaner faces and hands than they had had before in weeks.

"Now, just sit right down to the table," Mrs. Dickson urged, the moment they came filing in. "Everything is ready for you to begin eating right away; and nobody is to wait on ceremony. I know you must be about as hungry as bears. Dick and I have already eaten until we are both about ready to bust, the things looked and smelled so good we couldn't wait no how, so we've got nothing else to do but just to wait on you big hungry men—There, sit right down there, Ham, in front of that gold-pan full—but it is a surprise; and I won't tell you what is in that pan yet," and she pushed the grinning Ham down on the block of wood that did

service in lieu of a dining chair in front of a steaming covered gold-pan.

One near whiff of the contents of this pan and Ham jumped to his feet.

"Whoop, boys!" he yelled. "It's chicken! It's chicken pie! Whoop! Hurrah for th' Leetle Woman!" and, whirling suddenly around, he threw one big arm around Mrs. Dickson, drew her quickly to him, and gave her a smack on one of her rosy cheeks that sounded like the report of a pistol.

"And the only chickens in Hangtown are in that pie," declared Dickson proudly. "When we saw those birds Mollie and I just couldn't keep our hands off them. They seemed to be just a-begging us to buy them and make them into a chicken pie. Now, fall to, boys; and, with every mouthful that you eat, think of our good luck. It means a lot to us, boys, a whole lot to the Little Woman and me. We are going back to our dear old New York home on the beautiful banks of the Hudson—Hi, there, Ham! Just start the chicken pie a-going round. You are not the only mouth at the table," and Dickson, doubtless feeling that sentiment was beginning to get a little the best of him, rushed excitedly about the table, as he helped to pass the good things Mrs. Dickson had cooked from one to another.

That was a dinner to remember as long as one lived. The circumstances of its giving were so unusual and so generous, its surroundings were so

unique, and its jolliness was so whole-hearted and spontaneous, that ever afterwards it was one of the bright spots in the memories of all who were present.

When the eating was ended the men went outside and built a huge fire in front of the house; and then sat down around it and smoked their pipes and told stories and compared mining notes and discussed the ever-present questions of where the gold came from and how it got there, all of which would make interesting reading, but which, because of other events that are crowding forward, must be passed over thus briefly.

For a couple of hours the talk around the camp-fire continued; Mrs. Dickson had joined the circle, and then Mr. and Mrs. Dickson both rose.

"It's getting late and we must be going," declared Mrs. Dickson.

"Not yit! Not yit! Not until you've sung for us!" cried Ham, jumping to his feet. "We can't let her go without a song, can we, boys?"

The reply was an unanimous demand for the song; and Mrs. Dickson, smiling and bowing and blushing, like a happy schoolgirl, and declaring that she was afraid she had eaten too much to sing, straightened up her plump little body, threw back her head, and was about to begin to sing in the dark shadows where she stood, when Ham caught her by both her shoulders and gently pushed her out into the bright light of the camp-fire.

"Th' song wouldn't sound nigh as good, if we couldn't see th' singer plain," he declared, his face seemingly one broad grin. "Thar, that's 'bout right," and he swung her around so that the brightest light shone full on her face. "Now give us good old 'Ben Bolt.' Somehow that song kinder seems tew sweeten me all up inside," and Ham sat down almost directly in front of Mrs. Dickson.

Mrs. Dickson had a sweet, clear, bird-like voice, and what she lacked in training she more than made up in the feeling she put into the words she sang; and her singing always touched the hearts of these lonely miners deeply. But to-night, as she stood there, with the ruddy light of the camp-fire shining on her face and dimly illuminating the surrounding shadows of the lonely night and the towering mountains and the tall pine trees, and sang the beautiful words and melody of "Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt," she struck a deeper chord still, and all listened like men entranced until the last note died away in the silence of the encircling night.

"I never knowed I liked music so well, 'til I heer'd th' Leetle Woman sing," declared Ham the moment the sound of Mrs. Dickson's voice ceased. "Her singin' seems tew come a-knockin' right at th' door of a feller's heart. Now, dew sing us another one," and he turned pleadingly to Mrs. Dickson.

"Yes, I will sing you just one more song; and then we must be going. It must be nearly ten

o'clock; and those two tired boys have been nodding their heads for the last half-hour."

"Me!" "We!" and Thure and Bud both sat up very straight. "Oh, we were just nodding our heads to keep time to your music. Please do sing again."

For answer Mrs. Dickson lifted her face to the sparkling skies; and then, while the tears gathered in her own eyes and her sweet voice trembled a little, she sang that song dear to the hearts of all wanderers no matter where they roam, "Home, Sweet Home."

"Now, good night, everybody. Come, Dick," and, turning quickly the moment she stopped singing, Mrs. Dickson caught hold of her husband's arm and hurried away before the spell of the song and the singer was broken.

A half an hour later the lights in both the houses were out and their inmates sound asleep.

CHAPTER XVII

POCKFACE AGAIN

THURE and Bud were very tired and very sleepy and both slept very soundly; but, when the door of their house was suddenly flung violently open some three hours after they had closed their eyes in sleep, and a voice, hoarse with excitement, yelled: "Fire! Fire! Fire!" they found themselves out of their bunks and on their feet and wide-awake almost before the startling cry ceased to echo in the room.

"Where, where is the fire?" they heard Conroyal asking excitedly, as they hurried into their trousers and heavy boots—they had slept in their shirts. A moment later came a cry of horror from Ham in reply.

"God in heaven!" he yelled. "It's Dickson's! Th' Leetle Woman!" and he plunged madly out through the door, followed by every other man in the house.

Thure and Bud were close behind the last man. The moment they were outside their eyes caught the red glow of the fire shining wickedly through the openings between the pine trees that surrounded Dickson's little cabin, and raced madly toward it.

The distance was not great, not over twenty rods; and they soon found themselves in front of the burning house.

Dickson and his wife, half-dressed, were rushing madly about, empty water-pails in their hands. Already the red flames were leaping through one of the windows; and, as they looked, a heavy jet of black smoke, swiftly followed by a long tongue of fire, shot out from the roof above the flaming window.

"Buckets! Buckets!" yelled Ham. "Form a line tew th' spring an' pass buckets of water from it tew th' house. Here, you," he cried, as his eyes caught sight of Thure and Bud, "back tew th' house an' git everything in it that'll hold water—pails, gold-pans, kettles, anything—Hurry!"

Thure and Bud turned instantly and sped back to the house, their hearts thumping with excitement. They knew the value of moments in a case like this. Thure was a little longer-legged, a little the swifter runner, and he reached the open door perhaps a rod ahead of Bud and sprang through it, thinking only of how he could get hold of the kettles and the pails and the pans in the quickest manner possible.

The room was dimly lighted by a ruddy glow from the coals still burning in the fireplace; and by this light, Thure, the moment he sprang through the door, saw a figure start up suddenly from near the bunk where he slept and turn a pock-marked,

face, white with fear, toward him; and then, as his momentum carried him into the room and before he could lift a hand in self-defense, he saw the right hand suddenly swing up a heavy club, as the figure leaped toward him, and—a blinding crash and he knew no more for the present.

Bud was more fortunate. He saw the figure, saw the blow hurriedly aimed at him, in time to spring aside; and then, with a yell of rage, for he, too, had caught sight of the pock-marked face of his assailant, he hurled himself toward him.

But Pockface had had all of the fight he wanted; for, the instant he struck at Bud and failed to hit him, he sprang through the door.

Bud, in his mad rush to get at the man, failed to see the body of Thure sprawled out on the ground at his feet, and, as he sprang after the fleeing scoundrel, his feet struck the body and pitched him head-first to the ground, where he lay for an instant, stunned by the fall. When he jumped to his feet and sprang excitedly to the door, Pockface had vanished completely into the darkness of the night.

There was no use now of trying to follow him. Besides, there was Thure! What had happened to him? He—he might be dead! And, with fingers that trembled with anxiety and dread, Bud hurriedly lit a candle and bent over Thure, for the moment forgetful of the fire and of everything else but the condition of his friend.

A great bump on the top of Thure's head showed

where the blow had fallen; but he was breathing, and Bud's experience in such matters quickly told him that he was only stunned.

On a box in a corner of the room stood a pail, filled with water. Bud quickly seized this pail, and, in his excitement, dumped its whole contents directly down on the white face of Thure.

A shiver ran through the still form, then both eyes opened and stared wildly, blankly around for a moment. Suddenly the blank, wild look left the eyes, and Thure struggled desperately to get on his feet.

"Did he—did he get the skin map?" he cried excitedly, as Bud endeavored to quiet him. "I—I left it under my pillow. Hurry! See if it is still there. Never mind me. I'll be all right in a minute. Hurry and see if the map is still where I left it," and he pushed Bud impatiently away from him.

Bud quickly caught up the candle and hurried to the bunk. Both pillows lay on the floor, where some hurried hand had thrown them, and the little buckskin bag, with its precious contents, was nowhere in sight. Bud jerked off all the blankets and held the candle up high; but no sight of the buckskin bag rewarded his efforts.

"It is gone!" and he turned a despairing face to Thure. "He got the map! And after all we have gone through!"

"What!" Thure was now on his feet, all the dizziness gone, and rushing toward the bunk. "The

map gone!" and he seized the candle from Bud's hand, and, holding it so that its light illuminated the whole bunk, stared wildly down on the rumpled surface of the rude bedtick, which now, the blankets having been thrown off, showed its entire surface to the light of the candle. There could be no doubting his own eyes. The buckskin bag was not there!

"Gone! It is gone!" and Thure staggered back from the bunk, almost as if he had received a blow. "But," and he straightened up suddenly, his face white and his eyes sparkling with rage, "he has not had time to go far. Get your rifle, your pistols," and he sprang to the rack where hung his rifle and pistols. "We must catch him. Oh, if I could but just get hold of him!" and, rifle and pistols in hands, he rushed to the door; and not until the glare of the burning house met his eyes did he come to his senses sufficiently to see the folly of rushing blindly out into the darkness of the night and the wildness of the mountains after the scoundrel who had fled he knew not whither, or to recall the purpose for which he and Bud had been sent back to the house.

"Mother of men! We are forgetting all about the fire!" and he stopped abruptly. "Well, it would be useless to try to find him now," and his eyes glared wrathfully out into the darkness of the night. "The buckets! Hurry!" and he rushed back into the house.

When, a few minutes later, Thure and Bud,

loaded down with kettles, pails, pans, and even frying-pans, rushed pantingly up to Ham, who stood at the end of the long line of men, stretching from the house to the spring, throwing the water, as it was passed to him, with his great strong arms, on the fire, he turned angrily on them.

"Git tew th' spring," he shouted, "with them kettles and pails, you young—" Then, catching sight of their white faces, he stopped abruptly. "What's happened?"

"They've got the map!"

"Durn th' map! Git tew th' spring with them pails an' git busy with th' water," and, with a violent swing of his huge body, Ham flung a large gold-pan full of water on top of the flaming roof.

Thure and Bud at once hurried to the spring.

By this time the alarm of fire had raced up and down the gulches and ravines of Hangtown and men were running from every direction toward the burning building. Already a hundred or more men were stretched in a long line from the house to the spring; and down this line buckets and pails and pans of water were passing as swiftly as strong and willing arms could send them. The air was filled with the yells and cries of excited men.

Thure and Bud at once pushed their pails and buckets into service and promptly joined a new line that was forming.

Fortunately the spring was a large one and the water held out; and, in a short time, a great shout

went up from the house and rushed along the two lines of bucket men up to the spring and echoed and reëchoed triumphantly up and down through the rocky gulches and canyons of Hanktown.

The fire had been conquered; but not until the larger part of the roof had been burned and the greater part of the interior furnishings destroyed.

The cause of the fire was a mystery. Mr. and Mrs. Dickson were positive that it did not come from the fireplace, that, in fact, it had started in almost the opposite end of the house and nearly directly under their bunk; for, when the heat and the smoke awoke them, the foot of the bunk and the lower end of the bed-clothes were already ablaze. Everything inside the house was too badly burnt to furnish any positive clues; but it was the opinion of nearly all the excited men that the house had been set on fire purposely; and, if they could have but laid their hands on the miscreant, there would have been as speedy a hanging as the one had been that had given the town its unsavory name.

The moment the excitement of the fire was over, Thure and Bud hastened to their fathers and hurriedly told them what had happened on their return to the house and of the disappearance of the map.

The two men at once quietly but quickly gathered the other members of the company and soon all were back again in the house, with the door tightly closed.

"Now," and Mr. Conroyal turned to the two boys, "tell us exactly what happened."

Thure quickly told all that he knew up to the moment the club had knocked him senseless and exhibited the bump, now as large as a goose egg, on the top of his head in proof of the story; and then Bud related his part in the adventure. Both boys were certain that the man they had seen in the house was Quinley, or Pockface as they continued to call him.

"An' you say th' skunk got that thar skin map an' gold nugget!" and Ham sprang excitedly to his feet.

"Yes. I—I left it under my pillow. We found both pillows on the floor; and the buckskin bag gone. The man was standing near my bunk when I rushed in, and must have just found it. Oh, if I only could have got hold of him before he hit me!" and tears of baffled rage filled Thure's eyes.

"You're sart'in th' bag ain't thar?" and Ham glanced at the dismantled bunk and the disordered bed-clothes scattered about.

"Look for yourself," and Thure sank down on one of the rude chairs and, throwing his arms disconsolately on the table, laid his aching head down on them.

Ham seized a lighted candle and strode over to the bunk, followed by all the other men. He held the candle over the bunk and his eyes swiftly searched every inch of the surface of the bedtick.

"Th' yunks are right! Th' bag's not here!" and, with an angry growl, he seized the offending mattress and hurled it out on the floor.

There was a soft thud, as of something small but heavy striking the ground of the floor; and then, with a yell that caused Thure to jump nearly a foot up in the air from his seat at the table, Ham dropped the candle and caught up something from the floor.

"Hal'lujah! Hurrah! Amen! Here it is!" yelled the excited man, as he held up where all could see the missing buckskin bag.

In his mad tumble out of the bunk at the alarm of fire, Thure must have knocked the little bag down between the mattress and the side of the bunk, whence the rude hands of Ham had dislodged it when he had jerked the mattress off the bunk; and this, probably, was all that had saved it from the fingers of Pockface, for the pillows lying on the floor showed that he had evidently searched underneath them.

There is no need of picturing the rejoicing in that log house for the next few minutes; but, when all had quieted down and were beginning to talk sensible again, Rex suddenly jumped to his feet with an exclamation of horror and rage.

"The curs! The cowards! The murderers!" he cried excitedly.

"What's bitin' you?" demanded Ham in astonishment.

"The fire! Can't you see the curs set Dickson's house on fire on purpose to get us out of the way?"

"Great guns! If I don't believe you are right!" and Ham leaped to his feet, his face white with rage. "An' a woman asleep in th' house! They might have burnt both on 'em tew death! They shore won't stop at nuthin' tew git that map! An' tew think I had my grip on that red-headed skunk's shoulder, an' I only knocked him down!" and Ham dropped back on his seat, muttering wrathfully to himself.

"I reckon Rex has the right of it," and Mr. Conroyal's lips tightened. "But the devilish cunning of it! They knew that whoever had the buckskin bag would not be apt to sleep with it on him; and they calculated that the sudden alarm of fire, coming when all were sound asleep, would so startle, that, for the moment, even the skin map would be forgotten and all would rush out to help put out the fire, and give them a chance to search the house. Cunning, but as devilish as it is cunning! Think of how they might have burnt Dickson and the Little Woman in their bed! By the good God, we would be justified in killing either one of them on sight!" and his rugged face hardened.

"We certainly would," agreed Mr. Randolph emphatically. "They have forfeited all their rights of manhood. But, I fancy, the cunning devils won't give us a chance for an open fight. They will always strike from behind something; but now that

we know they are on our trail, we've got to be on the lookout for them."

"Pears tew me," and Ham held the buckskin bag up, "that it's this here thing that needs special guardin'. It's th' map that they are after; an' they don't 'pear tew be none partic'lar how many or who they kill tew git it, only so they save their own hides. Now, I reckon, we've got tew keep an eye on this here map night an' day 'til we gits tew th' Cave of Gold; an' then, like as not, we'll have tew fight for th' gold. First off, it 'pears tew me, we otter git some better place tew hide th' map since them curs seem tew know 'bout th' buckskin bag," and Ham took the fateful map out of the little bag and spread it out on his knees.

"I know," and, in his excitement, Thure jumped to his feet and caught up the map. "I know a good way to hide the map, and, maybe, fool them. We'll leave the gold nugget in the bag, and I'll sew the skin map on the inside of my shirt bosom. Then, if they should somehow get hold of the buckskin bag, they'd only get the gold nugget; but, to get the map, they'd have to get me; and, I reckon, dad and the rest of you are able to keep them from doing that!"

"That sounds sensible," declared Ham. "Thure'll always have his shirt on his back night an' day; an' so we'll jest have tew keep an eye on Thure. I reckon that idee is 'bout as good as any we can think of—only, we must be powerful care-

ful tew keep it secret an' tew never let th' yunk git out of our sight for an instant."

After a little discussion all agreed that Thure's plan was a good one; and, accordingly, Thure at once took off his shirt and carefully and smoothly sewed the skin map on the inside of its bosom, the face of the map toward the cloth; and then, over all, he sewed another piece of cloth, so that the map was completely hidden between the two folds of cloth.

"There," he said, as he pulled the shirt back on his body, "I'd like to see Pockface or Brokennose get the map now, without getting me; and, I reckon, you fellers will see that they have their hands full if they tackle that job," and his eyes glanced proudly around the little circle of men, who had gathered close about him while he was performing his interesting little feat in sewing.

And Thure had good reasons for his pride and confidence in his comrades; for his father and Frank Holt, his uncle, and Hammer Jones and Rex and Dill and Mr. Randolph were all old trappers and hunters and Indian fighters, who had been tried by every form of peril and had never been found wanting. Indeed, the names of Hammer Jones and Noel Conroyal and Steeltrap Smith, as Frank Holt was once called, were still famous throughout all the Rocky Mountain region, for the deeds of daring and skill that had made them comrades in fame, as they often had been in fact, with trappers

and Indian fighters like Kit Carson and Jim Bridger and Old Bill Williams and half-a-dozen other fearless men, whose courage and pluck and wonderful skill had made their names known wherever a camp-fired blazed throughout all the great West. Yes, Thure had good reasons to believe that Broken-nose and Pockface, cunning as they were, would certainly have their hands full, if they got the skin map away from him, while he was watched by such men as these.

"They'll have tew git all of us afore they git you, son," declared Ham, in reply to Thure's assertion. "Now," and he stretched his big frame and yawned, "seein' that we've 'tended tew all th' business that needs 'tendin' tew tew-night, we'd better try an' git a leetle more sleep afore mornin'. Leastwise I'm a-goin' tew," and, after a glance through the window to assure himself that everything was all safe and quiet around the Dickson house, he slipped a loaded pistol under his pillow and climbed into his bunk.

Ham's advice, as usual, was too good to be neglected, and soon all were in their bunks. But, just before each had climbed into his bunk, he, like Ham, had slipped a loaded pistol under his pillow. They were not the kind of men to go unprepared when danger threatened.

CHAPTER XVIII

STORY OF THE GREAT DISCOVERY

A CHEERY call from Mr. and Mrs. Dickson greeted our friends the next morning, as they started down the trail on their way to the wing dam. Both were in the best of spirits and did not appear to be bothering their heads in the least over their rather exciting and unfortunate adventure of the night before. Indeed, what could the burning of a log cabin more or less matter to a man who was digging out of the ground from five to ten thousand dollars' worth of gold a day! They were busily at work putting on a temporary roof in place of the one the fire had destroyed.

"Lose much?" queried Ham sympathetically, as the little company came to a halt in front of the ruins.

"Only a little worn-out clothing and some mighty poor furniture," laughed Dickson. "Mollie and I calculate we can fix up the roof by noon good enough to last the few days we are likely to remain here; and the time it takes us to do that is our only real loss. You see, we've decided, if we get as much as twenty thousand dollars' worth of gold out

of that hole, we'll get for New York as fast as the good Lord will let us; and it looks now as if it was good for that much, at least, before it gives out. Why, it won't take more than a couple of days more to fix us all right, if the gold continues to turn up the way it did yesterday! Hope it will be your turn next."

"Same here," laughed Mrs. Dickson. "My, but it does seem good to be digging real gold up out of the ground in handfuls. Hope that wing dam, or whatever you call it, will be the golden key that will unlock the door of fortune to you all."

"We all shore agrees with you thar," grinned Ham. "An' we all hopes that y'ur luck will continue, 'til you gits enough tew send you back home in fine style—not that we're none anxious tew see you go," he added hastily, "'cause 'twould be 'bout as painful an operation as bein' seperated from a sore tooth, to be seperated from that singin' apperatus of your'n. We'll be expectin' you tew come over an' sing some more for us tew-night."

"I certainly can't refuse, after such a compliment to my singing," she laughed back.

"It almost tempts me tew try hitchin' up myself, tew see them tew a-workin' tewgether as happy as tew nestin' birds," grinned Ham, as our friends, after a few minutes' longer talk with the joyful and fortunate couple, continued on their way. "I reckon that's 'bout th' kind of marriage th' feller meant, when he said they was made in heaven; for th'

t'other kind' pear tew be made in t'other place," and Ham chuckled.

That day they succeeded in building a wall of rocks, piled one on top of the other and plastered together with clay and the branches of trees, across the little stream itself and almost high enough to force the water to flow in the new channel. Consequently night found them jubilant; for now it began to look as if they might complete the dam on the morrow, and this was doing better by a day or two than they had expected to do.

"I reckon we had better bring along the pails and the pans to-morrow," Mr. Conroyal said, as he paused with Ham and Mr. Randolph for a last calculating look at the dam, before starting for the log house that night. "Looks now as if we might complete the dam and turn the water a little before night; and, if we do, we will want to get right to work at the hole. It sure looks as if we had struck a good thing here, boys," and his face lighted, as his eyes turned toward the elbow. "If this stream has been carrying down gold the way some of the streams have in this section, we'll have Dickson beat by a wagon load or two of gold a day. I can't see how it can help turning out something big," and the gold-fever light that shone in his eyes began to sparkle in the eyes of the others.

"It shore otter turn out big tew pay us for all this work," and Ham's glance slowly wandered over the huge piles of rocks and dirt that their shovels

and strong arms had reared, "but thar's no countin' on what it'll do. 'Twouldn't s'prise me none, if we took out a wagon load of gold; an', ag'in, 'twouldn't s'prise me none, if we didn't take out a thimble load. Gold is 'bout as unsart'in an' queer as women. When you think you've got it shore, gosh, it ain't thar at all! But, I reckon you're right 'bout th' pans an' pails; an' I shore hopes you're right 'bout th' wagon loads of gold."

After supper that night Mr. and Mrs. Dickson came over and joined the circle around the big camp-fire that Thure and Bud had kindled in front of the log house. There was no need to be saving of wood, when all one had to do to get it was to cut it. Wood was the one thing that was free and plentiful in Hangtown.

"How did she pan out tew-day, Dick?" queried Ham, as Dickson seated himself on a log.

"Well," and Dickson hesitated and glanced swiftly and just a little suspiciously around the circle of faces. Already the possession of much gold was robbing him of some of his open, free-hearted confidence in his fellow men, was drawing tight the strings of caution. "Well," he continued, after a swift warning glance into the face of his wife, "I fear that we have about come to the bottom of the pocket. Not much doing to-day," but the light in his eyes seemed to belie his statement.

"Oh, Dick," and Mrs. Dickson turned a reproving face to her husband, "how can you say that,

when we found this, and a lot of smaller nuggets, and a good three thousand dollars' worth in gold-dust besides!" and she held up before the astonished eyes of the circle a huge gold nugget. "It weighs exactly five pounds and three and three-quarters ounces, and is worth over a thousand dollars and the Little Woman's face glowed with triumph. "There," and she turned a pair of happy but defiant eyes on her husband, "I just couldn't keep a thing like that to myself; and I shouldn't want to, if I could; and I told Dick that I couldn't and I wouldn't keep it from you and I didn't," and her eyes sparkled merrily. "But Dick is getting a little afraid that, if it becomes known how big our find really is it might tempt some scoundrel to try and get the gold away from us."

"Not meaning you fellows, of course," and Dickson's face flushed.

"Shore, we understand an' without any explainin'," broke in Ham heartily. "An', Leetle Woman, Dick's more'n half right 'bout bein' some cautious who you tells y'ur good luck tew. Thar was a miner murdered for his gold 'bout a week ago nigh Sacramento City; an' th' murderers worn't caught an' might be a-snoopin' 'round Hangtown right now."

"Mercy!" and Mrs. Dickson turned a whitening face to Ham. "Why, there is hardly a lock on a door in all Hangtown; and most of the miners don't even take the trouble to hide their gold-dust se-

curely. I thought everybody knew that the climate of Hangtown wasn't good for the health of robbers."

"An' so it ain't for them that gits caught," answered Ham. "But humans will risk anything, even their lives for gold. Why, it wasn't more'n a week ago that we run Skoonly out of town for stealin'! So, I reckon, 'tain't more'n good hoss-sense for you tew be some cautious now that you are gittin' a fortune in gold. Not that thar's any harm in a-tellin' old friends like us, 'cause we knows enough tew keep mum 'bout it," and Ham glanced warningly around the circle of interested faces. "But 'twouldn't be good sense tew let th' hull town know th' size of y'ur pile. It's tew goll durned big an' temptin'. Not that I wants tew scare you, Leetle Woman. Only it's jest good hoss-religion not tew tempt y'ur feller mortals more'n it's necessary. Now forgit th' gold an' give us a song."

Ham had not been without his reasons in thus trying to arouse the fears of Mr. and Mrs. Dickson and in warning the others to keep their knowledge of the amount of Dickson's find to themselves; for, since the night adventure of Thure and Bud, he knew that Quinley and Ugger must be lurking somewhere in the vicinity, and that, if these two scoundrels should get knowledge of Dickson's great luck, neither their gold nor their lives would be safe.

Mrs. Dickson sang a number of the old songs, including Ham's favorite, "Sweet Alice, Ben Bolt"; but her music lacked something of its usual soul-fervor. Evidently the words of Ham had so aroused her fears that she could not keep her mind from wandering to the little pile of gold they had left almost unguarded in their lockless log cabin; and, in a short time, both excused themselves on the plea of weariness, and hurried home.

"Tew bad tew scare th' Leetle Woman," Ham said regretfully; "but 'twould be a heap worse tew have Quinley an' Ugger git that thar gold. I got scart of them jest as soon as th' Leetle Woman showed up th' big nugget; for they must be a-lurkin' 'round here somewhere, keepin' an eye on us; an', if they heer'd of Dickson's gold, they shore would try an' git it. Wal, we'd better follow their example an' git tew bed; for we've got a hard day's work afore us, if we finish th' wing dam an' turn th' water tew-morrer. I'm goin'," and Ham, knocking the ashes out of his pipe on the log on which he was sitting, arose and went into the house, whither he was soon followed by the others.

The next day as Thure and Bud were sitting in the shade of the cool side of the gulch, a little apart from the others, eating their lunch and discussing the great find they expected to make when they turned the water of the little stream into the new channel, Thure, whose eyes happened to be looking

down the gulch at that moment, suddenly exclaimed:

"Hello, look who's coming!" and he pointed down the gulch to where a man could be seen walking slowly toward them, a pick and shovel and gold-pan slung across his broad shoulders, a Mexican sombrero on his head and the rest of his body clothed in a blue flannel shirt and linen trousers that had once been white, protected by deerskin leggings and thrust into the tops of knee-boots.

"Out prospecting, I reckon," and Bud glanced curiously at the advancing stranger, for visitors had been rare in that lonely gulch. "Let's ask him to dine with us," and he smiled as he glanced at the coarse but abundant fare spread out on the ground between them. "He must be hungry, if he has lugged those things on his back far. Hello!" and he turned to the stranger, who by this time had come to within a couple of rods of where the two boys sat, "You are just in time to help us finish up these beans and pork. Come and have a seat at our table," and he grinned a welcome, as he nodded toward the food.

"I don't care if I do," smiled back the stranger, as he flung pick and shovel and pan from his back and dropped down by the side of the boys, "especially since I've got a little jerked venison here that I know will taste good to you, if you've been living on salt pork as long as the most of the miners have," and he began to undo a little bundle tied to the end

of his pick, and presently disclosed a chunk of dried venison and a couple of ship-biscuits, wrapped up in a coarse but clean cloth. This food he at once laid down on the cloth, which he had spread out on Bud's table, and bade the boys help themselves, at the same time and without any further invitation helping himself to the beans and pork.

"Wait, and I'll get you a cup of hot coffee," and Bud jumped to his feet and hurried to where Ham was superintending the boiling of a pot of coffee over the camp-fire.

"Say, dew you know who that feller is who has j'ined grub with you?" queried Ham, grinning, as he filled a tin cup full of the coffee and handed it to Bud.

"Oh, just a miner out prospecting, I reckon," answered Bud, as he took the coffee. "We thought we would be social and asked him to share our meal," and he started back with the coffee.

"Wal," and the grin on Ham's face broadened, "that feller is James W. Marshall!"

"What!" and Bud stopped so suddenly that he almost spilt the coffee. "Not the James W. Marshall who discovered the first gold in California!"

"Th' identicle cuss," laughed Ham. "But 'tain't done him much good so far."

"Glory be, we just thought he was an ordinary prospector, when we asked him to share our lunch! And so he is the man that started all this mad rush for California gold," and Bud's eyes turned curi-

ously in the direction of the stranger. "Well, he sure don't look as if the gold had done him much good."

"That's usually th' way on it," replied Ham. "Th' feller what finds it only gits th' first smell, then 'long comes some other feller an' gobbles it all up, leavin' th' finder nuthin' but th' glory."

"Maybe we can get him to tell us the story of how he found the gold," and Bud's face lighted up. "I'd like to hear it from his own lips."

"Wal," grinned Ham, "jest tell him that he's 'bout th' most abused man in all Californy, an', I reckon, he'll open his heart tew you. He's pow'ful sore over everybudy else but he a-gettin' th' gold, an' he th' discoverer."

"Maybe the hot coffee will do as well," laughed Bud, as he hurried back to his guest.

The hot coffee, possibly even more the contagion of the joyous enthusiasm of the two youths, did, indeed, seem to act like a charm on Marshall's taciturn and soured disposition; for, before the meal was half over, he was talking freely of his mining ventures with Thure and Bud; and it needed but a few well-directed inquiries to bring the desired story from his willing lips.

"How did I happen to discover the gold?" he began, as if the boys had asked him directly for the story, which they had not. "Well, it all came about in this way," and he settled himself into a comfortable position. "In May, 1847, Captain Sutter

sent me up the American River to look for a good site for a sawmill that he wished me to build for him; and, after a number of days of fruitless search, I found what looked like the exact spot I was hunting for on the South Fork of the American about forty-five miles from Sutter's Fort. Captain Sutter, you may be sure, was well pleased when I told him of my success; and we entered into a partnership, according to which I was to build the mill and he was to find provisions, tools, teams, and pay a part of the men's wages; and in August, everything being ready, I started out with six men and two wagons loaded with the tools and provisions. We first put up log houses in which to live; for we expected to remain there all winter. But this was done in no time for the men were great with the ax. Then we cut timber and fell to work hewing it for the framework of the mill and to building the dam, which, with the help of about forty Indians, who had gathered around us in great numbers, we put up in a kind of a way in four weeks. When the mill was nearly completed, it was my custom every evening after the men had quit work to raise the gate in the mill-race and allow the water to run all night, in order to wash as much sand and gravel as possible out of the race during the night; and in the morning, while the men were getting breakfast, I would go down and shut the gate and walk along the race to see where the work needed to be done for the day.

"One clear cold morning in January—I shall never forget that morning. I can see it all as I sit here—the nearly completed mill, the slopes of the surrounding tree-covered hills, the water pouring over the dam, the mill-race, a foot or so of water still rushing along over its bottom—I can see it all—"

Marshall paused, his eyes staring straight in front of him, a peculiar, dreamy, wild look in them that sent uncanny chills to the hearts of both boys as long as it lasted. What was he seeing? Visions?—Visions of what that morning meant to a gold-mad world?

"No, I can never forget that January morning," Marshall resumed, after perhaps a minute, the normal look again coming back into his eyes; "for on that morning I found the gold that has set the world crazy and proven little more than a curse to me," and a gloomy bitter look clouded his face.

"On that morning, as usual, after having shut off the water, I started to walk along the race, keeping my eyes pretty close to the ground, so as to make a note of where the ditch needed more digging. There was still about a foot of water running in the race. Suddenly my eyes caught a glimpse of something shining through the water, just a bright little gleam of yellow lying on the bottom of the ditch; but the first sight of it made my heart jump, for I thought it might be gold; and I reached my hand down quick through the water

and picked it up and examined it eagerly. The piece was about half the size, and of the shape of a pea; and felt and looked like gold, only it did not seem to me to be exactly the right color: all the gold coin I had seen was of a reddish tinge; this looked more like brass. I looked again in the water and saw another piece and picked that up. Then I sat down on the bank, with the little pieces of shining metal on the palm of my hand, and began to think right hard. Was it gold? I recalled to mind all the metals I had ever seen or heard of, but I couldn't seem to think of any that looked like this, that is, that looked enough like it to make me certain of what it was. Suddenly the thought came to me that this was probably nothing but iron pyrites, or fool's gold, that I had heard and read of, but had never seen. I trembled at the thought; for by now I had become considerably excited over the possibility of its being gold. But iron pyrites would break when pounded! I jumped to my feet, getting more excited every minute; and quickly found a couple of hard river stones, and, putting the pieces on one, I pounded them with the other. It was soft, and didn't break! It must be gold; but was probably largely mixed with some other metal, possibly silver, for I thought that pure gold certainly would have a brighter color.

"I don't know just how long I sat there, looking at them two little bits of yellow metal in my hand and thinking hard of all that it might mean to

me and the men with me, if it should really prove to be gold, for I sure was some excited; but, when I got back to our cabin, the men had finished their breakfast and were beginning to wonder a little what had become of me. I showed them the two pieces, and told them where I had found them, and that I thought they were gold. This excited the men a good deal; and I had some trouble to keep them from dropping everything and going to gold hunting, leaving me finish my job alone. However, I told them that as soon as we had the mill finished we would give a week or two to gold hunting and see what we could make out of it, and this satisfied them for the time, none of them then dreaming there was enough gold there to amount to much.

"After this, while at work in the race, we all kept a sharp lookout, and in the course of three or four days we had picked up about three ounces, our work going on the same as usual; for none of us at that time imagined that the whole country was sown with gold. If we had—that mill sure would never have been completed," and Marshall smiled a little bitterly.

"Four or five days after I picked up those two little pieces of yellow metal I had to go to Sutter's Fort; and, wishing to get all the information I could respecting the real value of the metal, I took all that we had collected with me, and showed it to Captain Sutter. He at once declared that it was

gold; but, like me, thought it was largely mixed with some other metal. We now tried to hit upon some means of telling the exact quantity of gold found in the alloy; but couldn't figure out how to do it, until we stumbled upon an old American cyclopedia, that gave the specific gravity of all the metals and rules to find the quantity of each in a given bulk. We now wanted some silver, with which to compare our metal; and, after hunting over the whole fort and borrowing from some of the men, we managed to get three dollars and a half in silver. Captain Sutter had a small pair of scales; and, with the aid of these and the cyclopedia, we soon ciphered it out that there was neither silver nor copper in the gold, but that it was entirely pure.

"This proof that the metal was real gold excited both of us considerable; but, when we had cooled down a little and talked it over, we concluded it would be our best policy to keep it as quiet as possible until the mill was completed. Now, at this time, there was a great number of disbanded Mormon soldiers in and about the fort, and, somehow, they came to hear of it; and then the golden cat was out of the bag, for the news that gold had been discovered just spread over the whole country like wild-fire. Indeed, I had hardly got back to the mill, before men with picks and pans and shovels and hoes and all sorts of tools began coming in, all anxious to fall to work and dig up our mill by the roots; but this, of course, we would not allow,

although I sometimes had the greatest trouble to get rid of them. I sent them all off in different directions, telling them of such and such places where I felt certain they would find gold, if they would only take the trouble to dig for it. Not that I really thought they would find any gold, for at that time I never imagined the gold was so abundant; but they would dig nowhere but in such places as I pointed out and I had to get rid of them some-way. I believe if I had told them to dig on top of a mountain, that, so great was their confidence in me, they would have climbed to the top of the mountain and began picking away at the rocks," and something, almost a twinkle, came into Marshall's eyes, brightening their somber lights.

"And did the parties you scattered through the country find any gold?" inquired Thure eagerly.

"Yes, many of them did, to my surprise," answered Marshall; "but the second real discovery of gold was in a gulch on the road to Sacramento. The third gold discovery was made on a bar of the South Fork of the American River a little above the junction of the Middle and South forks. The diggings over there where Hangtown is," and he flung up one of his arms in the direction of Hangtown, "was discovered by myself; for we all went gold hunting, as soon as the mill was finished. Some Indians found the diggings down at Kelsey's; and thus in a short time we discovered that the whole country hereabouts is sown with gold, thick

in spots but thin and scattering almost all over. Now that is the true story of the gold discovery in California, right from the lips of the man who picked up the first piece of gold, and who has had more cheating and robbing than thanks from the men the discovery has helped most," and the somber light deepened in the eyes of the disappointed and soured man, who always laid the blame of the misfortunes that seemed to follow him after the great discovery on the ingratitude of his fellow men, rather than on his own inability to use the opportunities that a kindly fate had thrust in his way.

"Well, it sure does seem hard," sympathized Bud, "that you, who discovered the gold, should be able to get so little of it. But," and his face brightened, "your luck may change to-morrow, and you may yet live to see yourself one of the richest men in California."

Here the huge form of Hammer Jones broke in on the three.

"How d'dew, Jim," and Ham reached down a big hand and gripped the hand of Marshall. "Ben tellin' th' yunks all 'bout th' Great Discovery, I reckon?" and he grinned. "Wal, if you'll jest sot down an' make y'urself easy for 'bout three hours, 'til we puts the finishin' touches on this here dam, I shouldn't be none s'prised if we was able tew show you somethin' of a discovery ourselves," and Ham pointed to the now nearly completed dam.

Marshall at once became greatly interested, when

Ham had explained to him what they hoped the dam would do for them; and not only agreed to wait until the completion of the dam, but to help in its completion; and, in a few minutes more, all were again at work, spurred to extraordinary exertions by the thought that a few short hours more would tell the story of their success or failure.

CHAPTER XIX

SOME EXCITING MOMENTS

EXACTLY at three o'clock, by Mr. Conroyal's big silver watch, the last shovel of dirt and the last stone was thrown on the dam; and, with cheers that echoed and reëchoed up and down the narrow gulch, our friends saw all the water of the little stream flowing into its new channel.

"Now get your pans and pails, and we'll hustle the water out of the hole, so that we can get at the dirt," Mr. Conroyal cried excitedly, the moment it was seen that the dam was working perfectly and that the old bed of the stream below the dam was fast becoming dry.

With another cheer, each grabbed up a pan or a pail, and all made a rush for the hole in the elbow of the now nearly drained bed of the stream, acting more like an excited troop of school boys than gray-haired and long-bearded men, as some of them were.

The old bed of the stream was solid rock, worn smooth by the action of the water; and, as Thure and Bud, in their anxiety to be the first to reach the hole, raced down this, Thure's feet suddenly slipped on the wet rock and down he went, the gold-pan he was carrying flying from his hands and banging

loudly as it slid for a short distance over the hard rock. He jumped quickly to his feet, fortunately unhurt, and bent hastily to pick up the pan. As he lifted the pan, which had been stopped by a bit of rock that projected a couple of inches above the level of the bed, his eyes caught a bright gleam that came from the upper side of the projecting rock.

For an instant Thure stared wildly at the shining bit of metal lodged against the rock; and then, with a yell that brought everybody to a halt, he dropped the pan and grabbed the bit of metal.

"Gold! Gold!" he shouted excitedly, as he held up between the thumb and finger of his right hand the bit of metal he had picked up, which was about the size and something the shape of his thumb.

In a moment all were crowded around him, eagerly examining the nugget.

"It certainly is gold!" declared Marshall, as he hefted the nugget on the palm of his hand.

"Hurra, that's a durned good sign that that thar hole is chuck full of it!" cried Ham, excitedly swinging the gold-pan he held in his hand around his head. "Come on! Let's git that water out of th' way an' down tew pay-dirt, jest as quick as th' Lord'll let us," and he started on the run for the hole, followed by all the others.

The hole in the point of the elbow of the old channel of the stream was about twenty feet across; and now, of course, was level full of water, which had to be thrown out before any digging could be done.

Ham, who had a long pair of rubber boots, bought on purpose for this occasion, now slipped them on his feet, pulled the legs up to his waist, where he fastened them to his belt, seized one of the pails, and stepped into the hole. At the first step he went down to the knee, at the second, nearly to the tops of his rubber boots, but the third step lowered him in the water only a couple of inches.

"Gosh, 'tain't deep! We can have th' water out of here in no time. Now, jest git in line an' I'll pass th' water out tew you," and he plunged the pail down into the water, and quickly passed it to the man standing the nearest to him, who passed it on down a line that had been quickly formed until the last man was far enough down for the water, when thrown on the ground, to run off down the old channel.

There were enough pans and pails to keep a constant stream of them passing up and down the line; and, as everybody, under the spur of the thought of what might lie hidden there in that hole, worked with feverish haste, the water was speedily lowered, until after an hour of as hard and tiresome work as was ever done by men, the bottom of the hole was laid bare.

"We'll dig a hole first off right in th' center of th' hole plumb down to bed-rock," declared Ham, as he passed out the last pailful of water. "Then, if thar's any gold here, we'll strike it shore. Throw me a shovel!" Ham's face was flushed and his eyes

were sparkling with excitement; for now the great moment was near, the moment that would tell whether or not all their labor had been in vain, whether or not they were to find the expected gold.

"Here! Here!" and Thure caught up a shovel and rushed to Ham; and almost collided with Bud, who, shovel in hand, was also rushing to Ham.

"Let us help you dig! Let us help you dig!" cried both boys, almost beside themselves with excitement.

"Now, jest hold y'ur hosses an' git out of here. This is men's work," and Ham good-naturedly thrust the two boys aside, caught up a shovel, and began throwing up the moist sand and gravel like an animated steam shovel.

The hole was partly filled with coarse sand and gravel; and, since gold is so heavy that it will sink down through sand and gravel until it comes to something more solid, all this had to be thrown off before they could hope to come to pay-dirt, which is usually a thin layer of gravel or clay lying on top of the bed-rock. Ham was now digging down to this bed-rock; and, when he reached it, he would throw a few shovels of the dirt directly on its top into a gold-pan, and then a few minutes' washing of the dirt in the pan would show whether or not they had struck gold. The hole he was digging was not large enough for more than one man to work in it at a time, consequently the others formed a circle around Ham and watched his progress with faces feverish

with excitement, any one of them ready the moment Ham tired to seize a shovel and jump into the hole in his place. But the shoveling was not hard and the sturdy muscles of Ham did not tire.

In the excitement of these thrilling minutes nobody saw anything but Ham, nobody heard anything but the push of his shovel through the moist gravel and the thud of the dirt as it fell on top of the ground. It is doubtful if a cannon fired within a rod of them, would have made one of them jump. Hence it is not to be wondered at that none of them saw the black clouds gathering about the tops of the mountains to the northeast and swiftly sweeping down toward them, nor heard the peals of distant thunder, sounding louder and nearer with the passing of each minute. The gold-fever was hot in their blood; and they were deaf and blind to all but the digging man.

Ham's shovel bit swiftly down into the soft, moist sand. Now he is down to his waist. Now only his shoulders show above the top of the hole. Suddenly, with a violent grunt, he straightens up.

"Bed-rock!" he yells, and begins digging again.

The excitement is now intense. Nearly every one has a gold-pan in his hand, and is holding it out toward Ham, ready to receive the first shovel of pay-dirt. That first shovel of dirt means so much, possibly a fortune for all! Even the graybeards, Mr. Conroyal and Rad Randolph and Frank Holt, men who could, who often had faced death without the

quiver of a muscle, are now all of a tremble with excitement. Thure and Bud are both bending forward so far that there is danger of their tumbling into the hole on top of Ham.

For a couple of minutes longer Ham shovels out the dirt, but more slowly and carefully now.

"Give me a pan," and he suddenly straightens up, seizes one of the pans, and disappears in the hole. A moment later he jumps out of the hole, the pan nearly filled with dirt in his hands, and races like a mad man with it to the little stream of water, followed by all the others.

In the excitement of the moment no one notices how dark it is becoming, nor hears an ominous sound, a distant roar, each second growing louder, and coming from far up the gulch.

Ham reaches the water, and, plunging the pan down into it, begins carefully stirring its contents with his big fingers. Around him bend the others, regardless of wet feet. In a few minutes the larger part of the sand and the gravel is washed out of the pan by the water. Now only a thin layer of black sand remains on the bottom of the pan. The crucial instant has come. Ham slowly straightens up, carefully pours all the water out of the pan, bends his head down close over it, and begins moving the thin layer of black sand about with his fingers.

"Is there, is there any gold?" queries Thure, unable longer to keep silent.

Ham does not answer for a moment, but continues

to stir the sand with his big fingers, bending his head still closer to the pan.

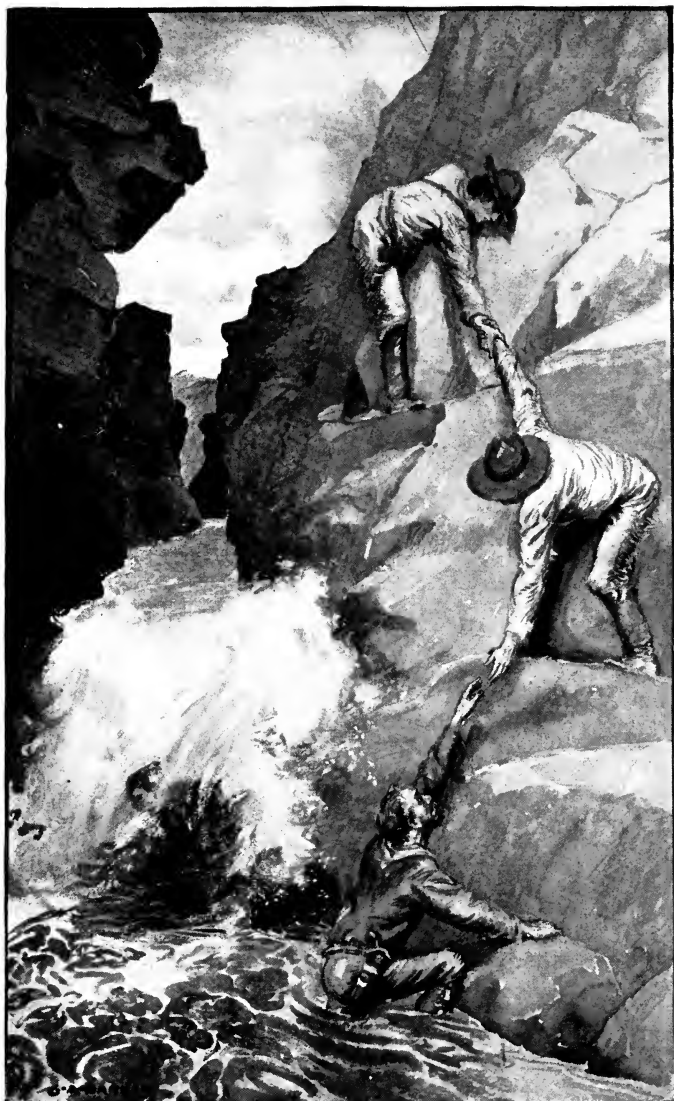
"Not a durned smell!" and he suddenly hurls the pan violently from him.

At this moment Mr. Conroyal utters a startled exclamation and glances quickly up the gulch. One look is sufficient to turn his face white. From where he stands he can see straight up the gulch for nearly half a mile; and half that distance up the gulch he sees a dark gray wall, ten feet high, topped with white, rushing down toward him with the speed of a race horse, and hears a roar like the rushing charge of a thousand cavalrymen.

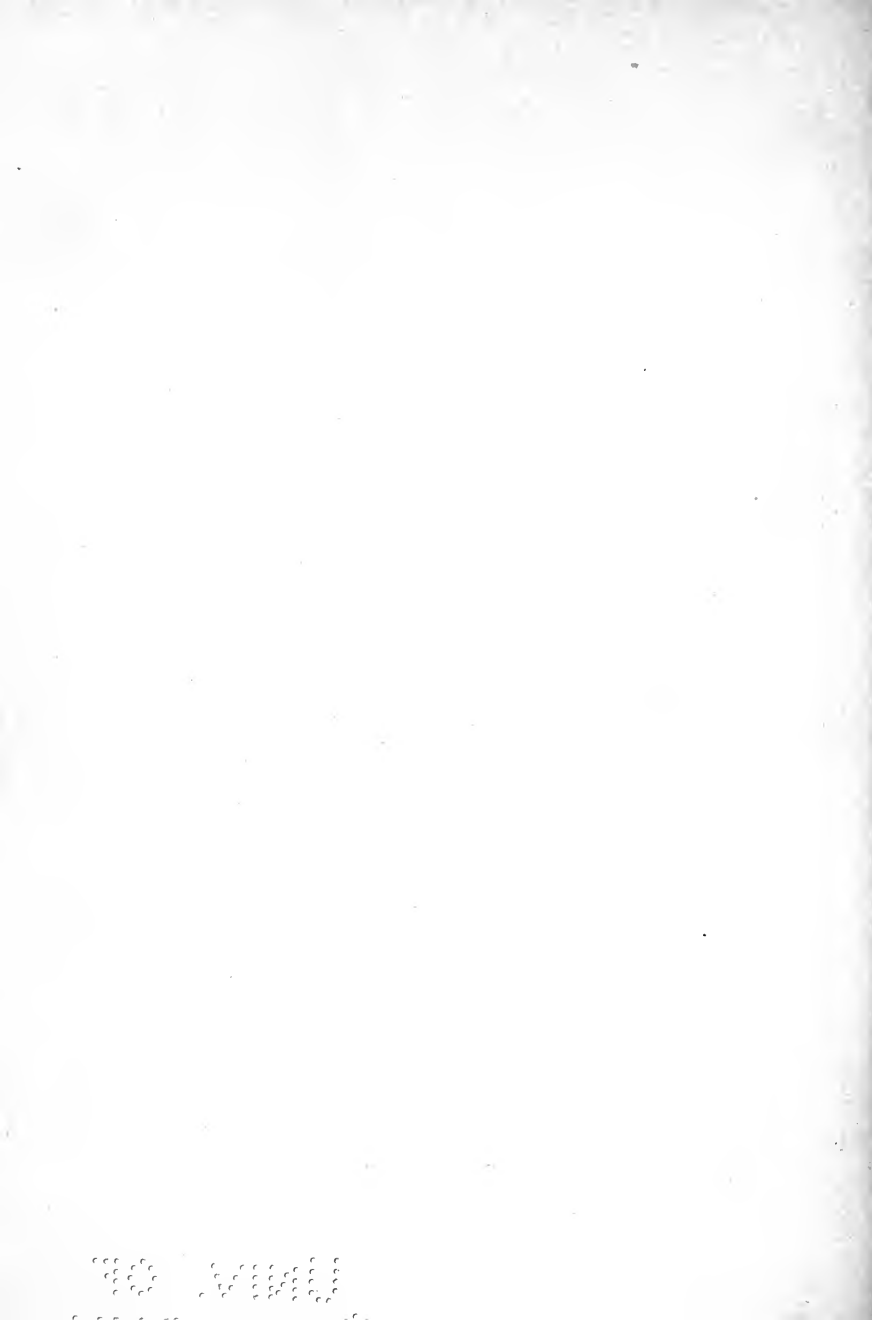
"My God, a flood!" he yells. "Climb for your lives!"

There was no need of a second warning. All could now see the advancing flood, could hear the deafening roar, could feel the solid earth beginning to tremble beneath their feet; and all began to climb for their lives up the steep side of the gulch. There was no time to stop to pick up anything. Pans, shovels, picks, and such parts of their clothes as happened to be off their bodies they left where they lay.

Thure and Bud happened to be climbing almost directly under Marshall. Suddenly, before they were above the danger line and when the flood was almost upon them, Marshall's feet slipped and he slid past the boys down directly in front of the advancing flood. It looked like death to stop to help him; but neither boy hesitated an instant.



BUD BENT AND STRETCHED HIS FREE HAND DOWN TO MARSHALL.



"Here, grip wrists!" yelled Thure, who was a little above Bud. "I will hold you while you pull Marshall up."

Bud instantly saw what was wanted; and, in another moment the two arms of the boys were locked together in a grip almost impossible to break.

"Now reach down and try and get hold of one of Marshall's hands. Quick!" and Thure gripped, with the strength of desperation, the point of a projecting rock with his free left hand and planted his feet firmly on the narrow ledge where he stood.

"Here, catch hold of my hand, quick," and Bud bent and stretched his free hand down to Marshall, who, with a face as white as death, was vainly struggling to climb up the almost perpendicular side of the rock down which he had slid.

Marshall saw the hand and caught it, as a drowning man would grasp a beam of wood floating within his reach.

There was a terrible wrench on the arms and bodies of the two boys, but neither broke his hold; and, with a tremendous pull, Marshall was jerked up on the ledge of rock on which they were standing, and, in another moment the three had climbed to safety, just as the flood swept by them, so close that they were covered with the foam that rode on its top.

For a minute the three stood panting and trembling where they were; and then they climbed to the

broad ledge where all had halted out of reach of the flood.

Mr. Conroyal gripped Thure's hand and held it warmly for a minute; but he did not speak a word. There was no need; for Thure understood.

Mr. Randolph was a little more demonstrative, but he said little.

The two boys had done exactly what the two men expected their sons to do; and the hearts of both were glad and proud, but neither man showed his pride in their brave action, only his joy that they had escaped the flood.

Marshall, the moment their fathers dropped their hands, seized a hand of each boy in each of his hands and started to thank them, with tears in his eyes; but both boys quickly jerked their hands away.

"Forget it," Thure said impatiently. "We only did what you or any other man would have done under the same circumstances—Great Moses, just look at that water!" and Thure's eyes turned to the flood that was now foaming and boiling a few feet beneath them.

At this moment the edge of the black clouds swept over them, and the rain fell down in torrents; but in a quarter of an hour the clouds had passed, and the sun was shining again, and the violence of the flood was beginning to slacken. In half an hour the flood had swept by; and with it had gone every vestige of the wing dam they had builded with so much labor and with so many high hopes.

"Durn th' durned dam!" and, without another word, Ham turned his back on the scene of their fruitless labors, and strode off toward Hangtown, followed by all the others, who fervently echoed his words in their hearts.

CHAPTER XX

ROBBED

“**N**OW I'll say good-by to you men,” Marshall said, when they reached the outskirts of Hangtown. “I am real sorry that your venture turned out the way that it did; but a man has got to expect any sort of luck in the diggings, and usually it is the worst sort that he gets dealt out to him, at least that has been my experience,” and he smiled bitterly.

Marshall now stood for a moment, irresolutely, his eyes fixed on Thure and Bud; and then, suddenly, he thrust one of his hands deep into his trousers pocket and drew out a little roll of buckskin, carefully folded and tied. This little packet he at once untied and unrolled and brought to light two small gold nuggets. With one of these in either hand he now approached Thure and Bud.

“My young friends,” he said, “I do not know as the life you saved is of much value; but still I prize it, being the only life I have; and I want to show you that I appreciate the quickness and the bravery of your action, and to leave with you some memento of the deed and of the man you saved from a horrible death. I am poor, others have grown rich

off my misfortunes—" Again that bitter look of mingled discontent and useless rebellion swept over his face—"but I still have left these two little nuggets of gold, the very two pieces of gold that I picked up from the mill-race on that cold January morning, the first two nuggets of gold found in California! I prize them above everything else that I possess; and, because they are so dear to me, I now most willingly give them to you, to keep in memory of this day and of the unfortunate man whose life you saved," and he handed one of the nuggets to Thure and the other to Bud. "Keep them carefully. They will be valuable mementos some day, Good-by," and without another word or waiting for a reply, he whirled about and walked swiftly away.

Thure and Bud both ran after him, and told him that, although they would prize the nuggets above anything else he could give them, they did not wish to take them from him, the one who first picked them up, that they belonged to him, that he ought to keep them; but Marshall would not listen to them, would not take the nuggets back, would not even stop to hear the boys' thanks, and strode on down the trail to where the lights of Hangtown were beginning to twinkle through the gathering shadows of night.

In after years these two little gold nuggets became the most valued treasures in the possession of the families of our young heroes; and their

grandchildren still cherish them among their most prized heirlooms.

"I reckon thar's somethin' jest a leetle out of kilter in th' top of Marshall's head," Ham commented, as he watched the man hurrying down the trail. "He's smart enough when it comes tew th' use of tools; but outside of them 'bout everything that he touches 'pears tew go wrong with him, an' ginerally it goes wrong because of th' fool way he tackles it, though he lays his bad luck all on th' ingrateritude of his feller mortals."

Thure and Bud very carefully stowed away the two nuggets in their pockets, and hurried on after their companions, who were hurrying up the trail leading to the log house.

As they passed the Dickson log cabin Mr. and Mrs. Dickson both came out. Mrs. Dickson's eyes were red from crying, and the face of Dickson was white and set, with a look of despair in his eyes not good to see.

"Hello! What has happened?" and Mr. Conroyal, who was in the lead, stopped suddenly and stared in astonishment at the woe-begone faces of the erstwhile happy couple.

"Robbed," Dickson answered sententiously. "Robbed and the mine has played out."

"Yes, robbed of all but about fifty dollars' worth of gold-dust that we took out this afternoon before the mine gave out," and Mrs. Dickson's voice

trembled. "And not a thing to tell us who did the robbing. Robbed of a good forty thousand dollars' worth of gold-dust! Enough to have taken us both back to New York state and enabled us to have lived the rest of our lives in comfort," and Mrs. Dickson's voice broke into sobs.

"Robbed! Robbed of all your gold!" and our friends gather around them in great excitement and indignation.

"When?"

"How?"

"Who did it?"

"Sometime this afternoon," answered Mr. Dickson, "as near as we can figure it out just a little before the storm. But all that we really know is, that, when we went to get the gold to-night, it was gone, and without a sign left to tell who had taken it."

"And we had it so well hidden," mourned Mrs. Dickson, "under a stone in the fireplace. And then to think that the mine should give out at the same time!" and again she burst into tears.

"Wal, it shore is tough luck, Leetle Woman," sympathized Ham. "But we've got tew take th' tough luck with th' tender an' make th' best on it. Now, supposin' we have a look around. Maybe we can find some clue that you missed, you being some excited. It'll go mighty hard with th' robbers, if we catch them," and Ham's face hardened. "Now

jest show us where you had th' gold hiddden," and he and the others followed Mr. and Mrs. Dickson into the house.

"We had the gold hid right there, under that stone," and Dickson pointed to an upturned flat stone, about a foot square, that lay near a small hole, excavated in the bed of the fireplace, which the stone had evidently covered over and concealed. "When we got in to-night there was not a suspicious sign anywhere; and it was not until I lifted the stone off the hole to put the gold in that we'd taken out since noon that we discovered that we had been robbed. I reckon there is no use of trying to find the robbers. A hundred men could hide themselves in these mountains in a couple of hours where ten thousand could not find them," and the look of despair settled back on his face. "Nobody saw them come and nobody saw them go and nobody has the least idea who did the robbing. So, I guess, it is just up to Mollie and me to buckle down to hard work and hard living again."

"Now, don't git discourage. Maybe thar's better luck in store for you than you dream of," and Ham's face lighted up, as if a pleasant idea had suddenly come to him. "I want tew have a talk with th' rest of th' members of th' Never-Give-Up California Mining Company; an' then, may be we'll have a propersition tew make tew you, an', ag'in, maybe we won't," and Ham grinned so good-naturedly that even Mrs. Dickson smiled wanly.

"Come on, fellers, let's git tew th' office of th' Never-Give-Up California Mining Company; an' go intew secret session tew consider important matters," and he hurried out of the house, followed by all the others, except Mr. and Mrs. Dickson, who stared after them with something like hope mingled with the look of wonderment on their faces. They knew that Hammer Jones never talked that way, under such serious circumstances, without meaning something. But, what could he mean?

Ham was the first to open the door of the log house and enter. The room was dark and he struck a match and lit the candle, which had been left on the table ready for lighting. The moment the light of the candle illuminated the surface of the table, Ham uttered an exclamation and stood staring blankly, for a moment, at something that glittered and shimmered in the flickering candle light near the center of the table.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" and he reached out one of his big hands and gingerly drew from the table a small keen-bladed Mexican dagger, which, with a strong blow, had been driven through a piece of paper deep into the wood of the table.

All the others were now crowding excitedly around the table; and Mr. Conroyal quickly picked up the piece of paper and held it up to the candle-light. On the paper were scrawled, with a piece of charred coal by a hand unused to writing, the following words:

WE ARE AGOIN TEW GIT THE MAP OR WE ARE A GOIN TEW GIT THE GOLD AFTER YOU GIT IT IF WE HAVE TEW GIT YOU TEW DEW IT. SO TEW SAVE YUR-SELFS TRUBLE AND TEW KEEP HUL SKINS ON YUR BONES YOUD BETER HAND OVER THAT MAP. THARS ENUF ON US TEW WHIP THE HUL ON YOU OFF THE FACE OF THE EARTH AND WE WIL DO IT IF YOU DONT GIVE UP THE MAP. A WORD TEW THE WISE IS ENUF. LIFE IS WURTH MORN GOLD. TI THE MAP TEW THE END OF THE STRING THAT YOU WIL FIND TIED TEW A STICK STUCK IN THE GROUND RIGHT NEAR YUR DOOR AND WE WIL PUL THE MAP TEW US. IF YOU TRI TEW FOLLOW THE MAP WE WIL SHOOT TEW KIL. IF YOU TRI TEW ROUSE THE TOWN WE WIL VAMOSE. WE ARE ON THE WATCH. GIVE 3 JERKS ON THE STRING WHEN YUR REDY FOR US TEW PUL THE MAP IN. IF WE DONT GIT THE MAP BY MIDNIGHT TEWNIGHT WE WIL KNOW ITS TEW BE WAR TEW THE DEATH.

This ominous note was unsigned; but there was no need of any signature.

For a moment after all had finished reading, no one spoke, but each stood staring from the paper to the dagger in Ham's hand. Then Ham suddenly straightened up with a growl of rage.

"I thought it was them, an' this proves I was right. Th' durned skunks!" and the righteous

wrath in Ham's eyes was good to see. "Now, men," and his glance swept swiftly the circle of excited faces, "this makes th' offerin' of proof unnecessary. We know who robbed th' Dicksons! An' we know, if they hadn't a-ben watchin' us an' a tryin' tew git hold of that thar skin map, they wouldn't have found out 'bout Dickson's gold an' did th' robbin'. This makes us sort of respons'ble for th' robbin'; an', I reckon, it's up tew us tew try an' make good what th' Dicksons lost on 'count of our bringin' them skunks down on them, more special since their mine's gin out, tew. Now, seein' that thar durned dam has played out on us, I reckon we're all a-calculatin' on havin' a try for th' Cave of Gold next; an' I figger 'twouldn't be more'n square for us tew ask th' Dicksons tew go long with us on th' hunt for th' dead miner's wonderful cave, an', if we find it, for them tew share in th' gold same as us. How does th' propersition strike you, men?"

"Bully!" exclaimed Thure enthusiastically. "Mrs. Dickson can beat dad and the rest of you making flapjacks all hollow; and she can make biscuits, real biscuits that a fellow can eat without cracking them first with a hammer, the same as nuts!"

"Wal, I reckon, that argyment settles it," grinned Ham.

"Supposing we consider the Never-Give-Up California Mining Company in session and put it to a vote," suggested Mr. Conroyal.

All agreeing, Mr. Conroyal promptly put the matter to a vote; and Mr. and Mrs. Dickson were duly elected members of the Never-Give-Up California Mining Company, with all the rights and privileges appertaining thereto, the vote being unanimous.

"Now I'll appoint Hammer Jones and Rad Randolph a committee to notify Mr. and Mrs. Dickson of their election and to escort them to the offices of the Never-Give-Up California Mining Company," and Mr. Conroyal smiled.

Ham and Mr. Randolph at once caught up their hats and hurried off to perform their pleasant mission; and in five minutes were back with the wondering man and woman on their arms between them.

As briefly as possible Mr. Conroyal now told the story of the skin map and the Cave of Gold; and how they had every reason to believe that the men who had robbed them were the same men who had murdered the miner, and who now were striving so desperately to secure the skin map; and in proof that the robbers and the murderers were the same, he showed the note and the dagger, which they had found on the table, in evidence that the men had been there that afternoon.

"Now," he concluded, "Ham thinks, and we all agree with him most emphatically, that, since we are in a way responsible for bringing the robbers down upon you, it would be no more than fair for us to invite you to join with us in our search for

this Cave of Gold, understanding, of course, that, if the gold is found, all are to share alike, as all will have to share alike the dangers and the difficulties of finding and keeping it; and, judging by the note we found on the table, the dangers will be real enough. Of course we are not sure that the cave really exists, nor, if it does exist, that we will be able to find it; but we have faith enough in it to give it a try. We plan to start on the hunt just as soon as we can get ready, probably sometime tomorrow. This I think explains the matter sufficiently for you to come to a decision. Are you with us?"

"Yes! Yes!" exclaimed both Mr. and Mrs. Dickson eagerly.

"In to the death, as the note says," added Mrs. Dickson, smiling. "And we thank you from the bottoms of our hearts for the chance."

"Do you know this murdered miner's name?" Dickson asked, his eyes sparkling with excitement. "I think I know the man."

"John Stackpole, the map says," answered Mr. Conroyal.

"That's the man!" declared Dickson excitedly. "The very man I went prospecting with last fall. He had some crazy idea in his head then about a Cave of Gold that an old Indian whom he had cured of some disease, he had been an army doctor once, had told him he had found in a hidden gulch that opened into a canyon. We hunted all up and down

the canyon, into which the Indian said the gulch opened, but we couldn't find no such gulch as the Indian described, and had to give it up. You remember my telling you all about it, don't you, Mollie?" and Dickson turned to his wife.

"Yes, yes," assented Mrs. Dickson eagerly. "You went on the trip while I was away to Sacramento City and you told me all about it, when I got back. Queer how things do turn out!"

"And so Stackpole really found the cave at last; but at the cost of his life," and Dickson's face saddened. "Too bad!—I mean his murder; for he was a good sort of a fellow, when he was away from liquor, but, let him get a little whiskey down him, and he was as ugly as the devil. I reckon that it was drink that drove him out of the army in disgrace; and I reckon it was drink that caused his murder; for he was a very cautious man and would have said nothing about his discovering the Cave of Gold, especially to strangers, if he had been in his right senses— Can I, can I see that map?" and Dickson's face suddenly lighted up. "Possibly I know the place."

"Sure," and Mr. Conroyal turned to Thure. "Get out the map, Thure."

Thure's face reddened a little, but, turning his back to Mrs. Dickson, he quickly, with the aid of his knife, ripped open the bosom of his shirt, and, pulling out the map, handed it to his father, who

at once spread it out on the table in front of Dickson.

"Lot's Canyon!" Dickson cried excitedly, almost the moment his eyes fell on the map. "Why, that's the very name we gave the canyon where we tried to find the hidden gulch, on account of a white pillar of rock, that Stackpole said might have been Lot's wife. And here is the very pillar itself!" and he pointed to the little square on the map marked Lot's Wife. "And the Big Tree! And the Devil's Slide! And Goose Neck Lake! Every one of them names that we gave to places! I am sure that that is the same canyon that Stackpole searched for the Cave of Gold when I was with him," and Dickson turned an excited face to Mr. Conroyal. "It's about a five days' tramp from here."

"That's what the dying miner said," broke in Bud eagerly.

"And do you think you can find that canyon again?" asked Mr. Conroyal anxiously. "The trail on the map is none too clear; and I reckon we'd have to do some hunting before we found it, with only the map to guide us."

"I am sure I can," answered Dickson, his eyes still on the map.

"Well, then, we are in great luck," declared Mr. Conroyal. "I— Jumping grasshoppers, if we are not forgetting all about that polite note!" he exclaimed, as his eyes happened suddenly to fall on

the dagger and the bit of paper, which, during all this time, had lain on the table neglected. "Now, what shall we do about that?" and his eyes flashed around the circle of faces.

"Let's first see if the string is really there," proposed Thure.

"Good idee," and Ham caught up the candle and started for the door, followed by all the others, Thure and Bud at his heels.

Within six feet of the door they found a sharpened stick thrust into the ground, with the end of a strong string tied to it. The string ran along the ground as far as the eye could see and disappeared in the darkness of the night, in the direction of a thick clump of trees forty rods away.

"Wal, now, they shore are cunnin' cusses!" and Ham's eyes followed the string admiringly until it was lost in the darkness. "Jest tie th' map tew th' end of this string, an' somebudy out thar somewhere in th' darkness will pull it tew him, without nobody here bein' th' wiser for it. Not a durned bit of use tew follow up th' string neither. They could shoot an' cut an' run long afore we could see them in th' darkness. They shore are good at plannin', th' durned skunks! Say, jest supposin' we send 'em a leetle message, jest tew see how th' string works," and Ham turned to the others, a broad grin on his face.

This impressed all as a good idea, and they hurried back into the house to prepare the message.

In a few minutes the message, written on the back of the piece of paper which they had found on the table, was ready. It was brief, but to the point, and read:

If you want the map, come and get it. There are nine men and one woman, worth any two men, who will be glad to welcome you.

The paper, with the message on it, was now rolled up tightly, and all hurried out to the string.

Mr. Conroyal took the paper, and, kneeling down by the side of the stick, untied the string, tied the little packet of paper strongly to it, and then gave the string three sharp, strong jerks.

The response was prompt. Hardly had he given the last jerk, when the string was pulled out of his hand, and the little packet of paper started bobbing along over the ground toward the distant clump of trees, with all watching its progress with fascinated eyes, until it disappeared in the darkness.

For, perhaps, ten minutes they stood there, no one speaking a word, and all eyes turned in the direction whither the little packet of paper had disappeared. Then they saw a faint glow in the little clump of trees, as if someone had struck a match.

"I reckon they're readin' it," grinned Ham. "Wonder how they like it?"

Ham did not have to wonder long; for, almost as he uttered the last word, a spurt of flame leaped out from the dark shadows of the distant clump of

trees, and a rifle bullet whistled so close by his face that it burnt the end of his nose, and buried itself in the logs of the house.

"Gosh A'mighty, he's got my nose!" and Ham made a break for the door of the house, one big hand holding on to the end of his nose.

In two seconds all were in the house and the door shut.

"How much on it did he git? Not enough tew spoil my beauty, I hopes," and Ham held a lighted candle in front of his face before a small mirror hanging on the wall. "Wal, I'll be durned! Jest burnt th' tip end on it!" and he set the candle down on the table in disgust.

The darkness of the night and the wilderness of the surrounding mountains made absolutely useless any attempt to follow up their enemies; and, after an hour spent in discussing plans, Mr. and Mrs. Dickson returned to their house, and our friends hurried into their bunks, to get the rest needed to fit them for a busy morrow.

CHAPTER XXI

PEDRO

THE next morning all our friends were up an hour before sunrise; for the Never-Give-Up California Mining Company had much to do that morning, if they started on the hunt for the Cave of Gold that day, as they hoped to do. The horses had to be brought from the little valley five miles away, where they had been turned out to pasture, needed supplies of food and clothing and tools had to be procured at the stores of Hangtown, and everything had to be made ready for the rough journey through the wilderness of mountains and forests to the northeast. But nine men and one woman can accomplish much in a few hours; and by noon everything was in readiness for the start, and the horses stood saddled and bridled and packed, ready for the journey, before the door of the log house, while our friends gathered around the rough table inside for their last meal in the house that had sheltered them for so long.

"Seems almost like leaving home," declared Mr. Conroyal, as his eyes glanced slowly around the familiar room.

"It shore does," agreed Ham. "We've had some

mighty good times in the old house; an' I hopes th' fellers who move in when we're out, will be sort of gentle tew things. Somehow it seems a leetle cruel tew desert them tew friendly old rockers thar, that have so often given ease an' comfort tew our tired bodies, not knowin' what sort of critters will next sot down in 'em," and his eyes rested on the two barrel-rockers. "They seem tew be a lookin' at me right now, sort of forlorn an' reproachful-like," and a smile lighted his face at the whimsical thought. "Wal, that kind of philosophizin' won't dig no gold. Now, dew you reckon them skunks are on th' watch an' will try tew foller us?" and the smile left his face.

"Yes," answered Mr. Conroyal. "They have probably been watching us all the morning. When Frank and I started out as soon as it was light enough to see to try and trace the string and maybe get onto the trail of the scoundrels, we both feel certain that we were watched and that somebody was warned of our coming, because, before we'd gone a dozen rods, we heard a coyotelike bark, coming from way up the mountain-side and ending in a howl that we are sure never came from a coyote's throat; and, when we got to the clump of trees, we found signs of someone having been there only a few minutes before, and followed the trail to a rocky gulch a dozen rods beyond the trees, where we lost the trail on the hard rocks. Yes, they sure will try to follow us; for now, I fancy, their plan

is, since they can't get hold of the map, to let us find the gold and then to try and get it away from us. At least that is the way Frank and I figure it out; and we've got to give them the slip somehow somewhere between here and Lot's Canyon, or fight for the gold. Quinley and Ugger have probably gathered together a band of cut-throats, and figure on being able to get the gold away from us after we have found it."

"And we calculate," continued Frank Holt, "that the best way to try and give them the slip will be to go into camp early to-night; and then about midnight to suddenly and quietly break camp and steal away under cover of the darkness, hoping to get away without their knowing it."

"I reckon they're tew cute tew be fooled that easy," and Ham shook his head.

"And so do we," grinned back Holt. "But we calculate that it will make them think that we think that we have fooled them, and so they won't consider it necessary to keep so close watch on us, and we can try to make our real getaway the next night or the night after."

"That sounds more like it," and Ham grinned his approval. "Wal, since we all 'pear tew be through eatin', let's git a-goin'," and he jumped up from the table and hurried out doors, nearly stumbling over a thin, sallow-faced, middle-aged Mexican, who stood near the door apparently waiting for someone to come out.

"Hello, Pedro! What you doin' here?" and Ham scowled down on the little Mexican, whom he had often seen working about Coleman's store. "Coleman send you for something?"

"No, señor," answered the Mexican. "Coleman kick me this morning; and now I no longer work for Coleman. I now would cook and keep camp for señors," and he bowed, with a flourish of both his thin arms. "Get wood, make fire, cook, carry water, clean dish, all I do for señors. I very good cook. Coleman say I make best flapjacks in Hangtown. All I do for señors for one ounce gold-dust a week. Si, señors?" and his bright black eyes flashed questioningly around the circle of faces that, by this time, had gathered around him.

"But, see, our hosses are packed. We're 'bout tew break camp," and Ham pointed to the horses.

"Si, señor," answered Pedro, smiling. "I know how pack horse, so pack no slip under belly. I go where señors go. I do good work, kind, faithful, honest," and again he smiled, until his teeth showed like two rows of yellow ivory in his mouth.

"Now," and Ham turned questioningly to the others. "I wonder if 'twouldn't be a good thing tew take Pedro 'long? He could help a lot 'bout hoss-packin' an' cookin' an' things, an' could dew all th' dirty heavy work for th' Leetle Woman."

"Reckon you're right, Ham," declared Mr. Conroyal. "Shall we take the Mexican on his own terms?" and he glanced inquiringly around.

"Yes, and a good bargain I call it," assented Mr. Randolph. "Pedro couldn't have staid as long as he did with Coleman, if he hadn't been a pretty decent sort of a Mexican; and he can help a lot about camp."

And thus it came about that Pedro, the Mexican, entered the service of our friends, without a thought of suspicion that he might be other than what he seemed coming into the head of one of them. If they had not seen him so often working about Coleman's store and felt sure that he was only an ignorant Mexican menial, they probably would have been a little more cautious about taking him with them on such a venture as they were about to undertake.

Mrs. Dickson was given one of the horses to ride, although she protested that she was just as able to walk as anybody; but the other five horses were all loaded with the packs containing the supplies for the journey and the mining tools, the men, of course, all walking. The five pack-horses were placed in charge of Pedro and brought up the rear of the little column of men that now marched slowly over the hill that flanked Hangtown and off toward the unknown wilderness of mountains and forests to the northeast, Ham and Dickson and Mr. Conroy in the lead.

For the first two or three days' march, or until they had passed beyond the region where the miners were at work, their way would be plain. They had

only to follow the trail of the miners to Humbug Canyon, the last known place marked down on the skin map. But from Humbug Canyon on there would be no trail to follow and they would be obliged to trust to the guidance of Mr. Dickson and the skin map to bring them into Lot's Canyon. After that they would have to depend entirely on the map and their own skill to discover the hidden opening into Crooked Arm Gulch.

Naturally Thure and Bud were in high spirits, now that they were actually on their way to the marvelous Cave of Gold; and, boylike, they allowed no thoughts of the threatening perils from Ugger and Quinley and their band of cut-throats to trouble their minds or to distract their attention from the wonderful scenes constantly unfolding before them, as they advanced along the trail leading to Humbug Canyon, where something interesting or beautiful or both met their eyes each moment, no matter in what direction they looked. Now it was some wonderful formation of nature—great masses of rocks towering thousands of feet above their heads, picturesque little mountain-surrounded valleys, deep canyons and gulches and ravines and chasms, beautiful cascades of water plunging over precipitous cliffs to fall in a stream of sparkling jewels on the rocks at their base, or great forests of columnlike trees, or winding, murmuring, plunging, seething, turbulent little streams of water rushing furiously toward some far-off valley, and like marvels and

beauties of nature. Again, in entering some little valley or ravine, they would come suddenly upon a picturesque little company of miners hard at work with picks and shovels and pans and cradles, searching for the elusive yellow grains of gold. Indeed, during that first afternoon, they found the miners everywhere, in the valleys, in the gulches and the ravines, along the streams, wherever there seemed the least prospect of finding gold, there these wild knights of the pick and the shovel were sure to be found; and, as they passed, the latest mining news would be shouted back and forth, enlivened with rude sallies of wit and merry well-wishes.

Sometimes they would pause for a few minutes to talk with the miners and to watch them at their work; and, on one of these occasions, Thure and Bud saw, for the first time, a couple of miners at work with a cradle, as this queer machine used to separate the gold from the dirt is called.

"I don't wonder it is called a cradle," Thure exclaimed, the moment he caught sight of the odd-looking contrivance. "Why, if it wasn't for that hopper on the upper end and the man shoveling dirt and pouring water into it, one would surely think that fellow was rocking his baby to sleep in its cradle. Can't we wait here a little while and watch them work it?" and Thure turned to his father. "The horses need a rest anyway."

"Going to clean up soon?" Mr. Conroyal called to the men.

"In about ten minutes," answered the shoveler. "And, I reckon, we can show some gold when we do. Won't you wait and see how it pans out?" he invited cordially.

"Oh, do, please!" cried both the boys.

"All right," assented Mr. Conroyal. "A rest won't hurt the horses, and I am sure the clean up will interest you boys."

"Bully! Come on. Let's get closer," and Thure started on the run for the spot where the two men were working.

The men had placed the cradle within a few feet of where they were digging up the pay-dirt, and near the cradle they had dug a small reservoir, which was kept constantly filled with water by means of a small trench dug from the little mountain stream a dozen rods away, so that they had both the water and the dirt handy, two very necessary things to make cradling successful, unless the pay-dirt is very rich. The machine itself, as Thure said, looked very much like a rudely made, baby's cradle. The body was about the same size and shape as the ordinary homemade box cradle seen in the homes of thousands in those days and underneath it were two similar rockers, but here the resemblance ended. One end of the cradle-box was a little higher than the other end, which was left open, so that the water loaded with the waste dirt could run out; and on the upper end stood a hopper, or riddle-box, as it was frequently called,

about twenty inches square, with sides four inches high and a bottom made of sheet-iron, pierced with holes half an inch in diameter. Directly under the hopper, which was not nailed to the cradle-box, was an apron of wood, fastened to the sides of the cradle-box and sloping down from the lower end of the hopper to the upper end of the cradle-box. Two strips of wood, about an inch square, called riffle-bars, were nailed across the bottom of the cradle-box, one at the middle and the other near the lower end. An upright piece of wood, nailed to one side of the cradle-box, furnished a convenient handle for the man who did the rocking. Such, briefly described, was the make of the curious machine that had so aroused the interest of Thure and Bud.

"Ever see a cradle work before?" asked the man who was shoveling the dirt and pouring the water into the hopper, as Thure and Bud came running up, their eyes shining with interest.

"No," answered Thure. "It sure is a funny looking machine."

"It sure is," agreed the man. "But a fellow can clean two or three times as much dirt with it as he can with a pan and do it better. This is the philosophy of it," and he shoveled the pay-dirt into the hopper until it was a little over half filled, and then, picking up a long-handled dipper, began dipping water out of the reservoir and pouring it on the dirt in the hopper, while the other man constantly kept the cradle rocking back and forth. "You see," con-

tinued the man, "the motion and the water loosens and softens the dirt until all of it, except the larger stones, falls through the holes in the bottom of the hopper and runs down the apron to the upper end of the cradle and then down the bottom of the cradle and over the riffle-bars and out the lower end, leaving the gold and the heavier particles of sand and gravel behind the riffle-bars. But a fellow has to keep the cradle in constant motion, or the sand will pack and harden behind the riffle-bars and allow the gold to slide over it, instead of sinking down through it, as gold always will when sand or gravel is loose or in motion," as he spoke, he thrust his hand into the hopper and picked out a couple of stones too large to pass through the holes in the bottom of the hopper, and, after closely examining them to see that there was no gold clinging to their sides, threw them away.

"But, how do you get the gold out of the cradle?" queried Bud. "It seems to be mixed all up with a lot of heavy sand and gravel behind the riffle-bars."

"We will show you, just as soon as we wash out this hopper full of dirt," replied the man. "Ay, Hank?" and he turned to his companion, the rocker.

"I reckon it is about time to make a clean up, Dave," assented Hank, shifting the other hand to the cradle handle. "Anyhow both my arms are about plumb tired out."

After about ten minutes of this vigorous rocking all the dirt had been dissolved and nothing remained

in the hopper except a number of stones, too large to fall through the holes in its bottom, which had been washed clean by the water and the shaking they had received.

"There, I calculate that will do the business," and the man addressed as Dave, dropped the dipper, with which he had been pouring the water into the hopper, while Hank stopped rocking the cradle and, rising to his feet, stretched up both arms over his head with a sigh of relief.

"Say, but this gold-digging is darned hard work," and he grinned down at the two boys.

"A darned sight harder than measuring cloth behind a counter," laughed Dave, as he lifted the hopper off the cradle and with a quick jerk threw the stones out of it and laid it down on the ground. "But a fellow gets something for his hard work—that is, he does if he is lucky," he added, as he picked up a large iron spoon from the ground near the cradle. "Now we'll see how the gold pans out," and bending over the cradle he began digging out the gravel and sand behind the riffle-bars with the spoon and throwing it into a gold-pan, which Hank held.

By this time all the company, except Pedro, who had been left in charge of the pack-horses, had gathered around the two men and were watching the cleaning up process with the greatest interest.

"'Bout how much dew you expect she'll pan out?"

queried Ham, as Dave scraped out the last spoonful of sand and gravel and threw it into the pan.

"Somewhere between three and four ounces," answered Dave. "At least that is about what we usually clean out. How does she feel, Hank?" and he turned to his partner, who was running his fingers speculatively through the wet sand in the pan.

"I'll bet you an ounce of dust that there is a good five ounces of gold in this pan right now," declared the man, his eyes shining.

Before replying Dave took the pan and ran his fingers a few times through the sand.

"I'll go you. Wash her out," and he handed the pan back to Hank.

Hank now took the pan to the little stream of water, where the swift current would help in separating the gold from the sand; and in a few minutes his skilful hands had succeeded in washing out of the pan all the sand and gravel, except a thin layer of black sand, that was too heavy to wash out without danger of washing out the gold with it, which now could be seen sparkling here and there in the sand.

"Want to back out?" and Hank held the pan up in triumph in front of Dave's face.

"Sure not. There is not over four ounces there," answered Dave, after a moment's close examination of the sand. "Get out your magnet."

Hank now thrust one of his hands into his pocket and pulled out a large horseshoe magnet, the ends

of which he at once began passing over the black sand in the bottom of the pan; and, since the black sand was nearly all iron, the magnet force caused it to cling to the horseshoe and in this ingenious manner the remaining sand was quickly drawn from the pan, leaving a thin, a very thin layer of gold-dust lying on its bottom.

Dave now produced a small balance from one of his pockets and the gold-dust was quickly gathered up and weighed.

"I win! Five ounces and a half!" shouted Hank triumphantly, at the same time giving Dave a resounding whack on his back with the flat of his hand. "That's the best clean up we've had since we started digging here. I reckon you boys brought us good luck," and he grinned joyously into the faces of Thure and Bud.

"Five an' a half ounces! That's a mighty good clean up," declared Ham, critically eyeing the little pile of gold-dust on the scale. "How often dew you clean up a day?"

"Usually about four times," answered one of the men. "But sometimes, when the shoveling is good, we get in another clean up or two by working a little late."

"Wal, tew hundred an' fifty or three hundred dollars' worth of gold a day is shore dewin' pretty well for tew men; an' I hopes y'ur good luck continues."

"No more measuring cloth behind a counter for

me, if it does," laughed Dave. "You see Hank and I were both clerks in a drygoods store back East; but we will both be proprietors when we get back, if our good luck holds out only a few months longer," and the look on the faces of the two men told how much they were counting on that proprietorship.

"I am sure your good luck will continue," smiled Mr. Conroyal encouragingly. "But now we must be on our way," and he led the way back to where Pedro was waiting with the horses.

That night our friends made their camp in a little grove of trees that grew on the bank of a streamlet flowing through a small mountain valley, where there was an abundance of water, wood, and grass.

Pedro proved himself so great a success at unpacking the horses and attending to the rougher camp duties that all felt like congratulating themselves on having secured his service. He was willing and cleanly, two rather rare qualities in the Mexican camp menial, who was usually sullen in disposition and dirty in person and habits. He also proved to the satisfaction of all that his flapjacks deserved all the praises that Coleman had given them.

"He's a jewel," declared Mrs. Dickson enthusiastically. "And, if it wasn't for something snaky and creepy-crawly looking in his eyes, I had rather have his help than that of most women's. But I guess that queer look and the way he has of watch-

ing all of us comes from his being Mexican. Now," and she lowered her voice, "are you still planning to break camp sometime during the night and try to fool Ugger and his men, if they are trying to keep watch of us?"

"Yes," replied Mr. Conroyal. "The moon will be up about midnight; and, I reckon, that will be about the best time for us to try to make our getaway. So the sooner we all get to sleep the more rest we will get. Now, how about the guard?" and he turned inquiringly to the circle of men who had gathered around the camp-fire for a quiet little talk, after the supper had been eaten and all the camp duties had been attended to. "Do you think it necessary for us to post guards over the camp nights?"

"Sart'in," declared Ham. "Them skunks would be shore tew be up tew some devilment, like stealin' our hosses or somethin', if we didn't; an' I don't calculate on lettin' 'em git th' start on us, if watchin' will prevent it. I'm for havin' a guard every night, until we git safe back tew civilerzation ag'in. Them's uncommon cunnin' scoundrels what's on our trail, an' we don't want tew take no chances with them."

"That's exactly the way I feel about it," agreed Mr. Conroyal. "'Twould be foolish to run any needless chances. Rex, you will stand guard for the first two hours. Then you can awaken Dill, who will keep guard until it is time to arouse the camp, which will be just as soon as the moon rises,

somewhere around midnight. Now everybody but Rex get into their blankets."

A small tent had been secured for the use of Mrs. Dickson, into which she now retired; but the men found "soft" spots of ground near the camp-fire, spread out their blankets on them, and, rolling themselves up in the blankets, lay down to as sound a sleep as ever blessed a man in the most comfortable of beds.

A little after midnight, just as the white disk of the moon rose above the tops of the mountains to the east, Dill quietly awoke his father; and then the two quietly, and cautioning all to make as little noise as possible, awoke the others.

Pedro, who had lain down near the horses, was at first inclined to be surly, when aroused from a sound sleep and told to pack the horses as quickly and as quietly as possible; but in a few minutes all his surliness had vanished and he was doing the work with a swift and skilful dexterity that showed long practice.

In half an hour the horses were packed and everything was ready to start.

"Now," and Mr. Conroyal lowered his voice almost to a whisper, "there must be no talking and everyone must move quietly, so as to make as little noise as possible, until we have put a couple of miles between us and the camp. I'll go on ahead and the others can follow in single file. Rex, you and Dill

and Thure and Bud help Pedro with the horses. You had better lead them for awhile. We will leave the camp-fire burning. Everybody ready?"

"Yes"—"Yes," came in whispers.

"All right. Come on," and Mr. Conroyal, walking carefully so as to make as little noise as possible, moved off down the trail that showed faintly in the moonlight.

In the excitement of the moment no one saw Pedro bend quickly down to the ground, just before starting, and swiftly slip a piece of paper on which was written the two words, "Humbug Canyon," under a stone that lay near the camp-fire, and then, with a cunning gleam in his snaky black eyes straighten up and give all his attention to the horse he was to lead.

All now fell into line and followed close behind Mr. Conroyal, Thure and Bud and Rex and Dill and Pedro each leading one of the pack-horses.

For a mile the trail was over the soft grass-covered sod of the valley, which muffled the sounds made by their moving feet, so that they might have passed within half a dozen rods of a camp without a man in it dreaming that a little company of men and horses were passing, unless he chanced to see them. Then the trail again entered the defiles of the mountains, where the going was rough and difficult and sometimes dangerous, on account of their not being able to see clearly in the dim light of the

moon; but Mr. Conroyal kept pressing steadily and silently onward, and as steadily and as silently all the others followed.

There was no talking, even after they had passed the danger zone. No one seemed to care to talk. There was something in the mystery of the night and the wilderness, in the white light of the moon falling on tree and rock and mountain and valley, in the silence of the vast surrounding forests and mighty piles of towering rocks that stilled the tongue.

For a couple of hours they journeyed steadily and silently on through the moonlit wilderness; and then Mr. Conroyal came to a halt in a narrow little valley.

"I reckon we've thrown the scoundrels off the trail by now, if we are going to to-night," he said; "and so we might as well go into camp again and rest up until sunrise; and as this looks like a good place we will go into camp right there under those trees," and he pointed toward a little grove of evergreen oaks that grew a few rods away.

All were tired and all were sleepy; and, consequently, all welcomed the decision to go into camp, and acted on it so promptly that, in fifteen minutes, all, except the guard, were rolled up in their blankets and soon were sound asleep.

CHAPTER XXII

THE MYSTERY OF THE TENT

“I RECKON we otter make Humbug Canyon afore dark tew-night,” Ham declared, as our friends, notwithstanding the break in their rest of the night before, moved out of the little valley, where they had camped, as soon as it became light enough to see the trail the next morning.

“Yes,” assented Mr. Conroyal, “but we will have to keep going to do it. Do you suppose we fooled Ugger and his gang and threw them off our trail last night?” and he turned a little anxiously to Ham and Frank Holt, who were walking by his side.

“If they didn’t have no one on watch, I reckon we did,” answered Ham; “but it’s more’n likely they’re cunnin’ enough tew be on th’ lookout for jest such tricks an’ that they know right now where we be. They know it wouldn’t dew for them tew lose track of us in this here wilderness of mountains, where ’twould be like tryin’ tew find a needle in a haystack tew try tew hit our trail ag’in, once it was lost; an’ so, I reckon, some on ’em has got an eye on us right now, an’ that we’ll have tew play a shrewder trick than that tew fool ’em. But, maybe, ’twill work all right as a sort of a blind, an’ make them

think that we think that we have fooled them, an' so make 'em keerless, so that we can fool 'em th' next time. What dew you think, Steeltrap?" Ham still frequently called Frank Holt by his old name, Steeltrap Smith, a name that had been given to him on account of his skill as a trapper, when his own name was unknown even to himself, as the readers of this series of books will remember.

"I think you are about right, Ham," replied Holt, "although I should not be much surprised if we gave them the slip last night. I kept watch all the time that we were on the move yesterday, but nary a sign of anybody following our trail could I discover. They sure must have a cunning trailer, or else they're not depending on keeping us in sight. Perhaps they got more about the trail from the old miner than we think they did, and are on the watch for us at some point ahead, which they know we must pass."

"That's a shrewd guess, Frank," declared Mr. Conroyal. "Now," and his face brightened, "why wouldn't it be a good plan for us not to pass through Humbug Canyon at all; but to go around it and to try to hit the trail again on the other side? If there is any place ahead where they would be likely to be on the watch for us, it is at Humbug Canyon, because that is the last place on the trail they could be sure of without the map. The trouble will be to get around Humbug Canyon. Maybe there is no trail that we can follow but the one running through the

canyon. Anybody here know anything about the region around Humbug Canyon?" and, raising his voice, he stopped and looked inquiringly around.

"Yes, a little," answered Dickson, quickly coming forward. "I spent about two weeks last fall prospecting in the mountains around it. What would you like to know?"

"Can we go to one side of Humbug Canyon and hit the trail to the Cave of Gold again beyond?" inquired Conroyal eagerly. "If there has been anybody stationed in Humbug Canyon to look out for us, we would like to fool them by not passing through it at all."

"I think we might do it by working around through Owl Gulch about five miles to the east of Humbug Canyon," Dickson answered thoughtfully: "but it will be considerable out of our way and the trail won't be nigh as good. I am not absolutely sure, but I think we could get through all right that way and not go nigh Humbug Canyon."

"Shall we risk it?" and Mr. Conroyal turned to the men, all of whom had been interested listeners to his query and to Dickson's answer.

"I think the idea a good one," declared Mr. Randolph, "because, if the old miner told them that the trail to the cave passed through Humbug Canyon, they'd be sure to have someone on the watch for us there; and, I reckon, we are good enough mountaineers to find the trail on the other side without much trouble."

"My sentiments tew a ha'r," agreed Ham emphatically. "Let's hit for Owl Gulch. 'Twould be worth goin' a hundred miles out of th' way tew shake them skunks."

"All right," and Mr. Conroyal turned to Dickson. "You are the guide from now on, Dick, so step to the front and we will follow."

This plan appeared to please all except Pedro, who, bending down by the side of one of the horses and pretending to tighten a rope holding the pack, scowled furiously and swore violently, under his breath, in Mexican; and the scowl was still on his face, when he again straightened up and prepared to follow along with the pack-horses.

"What's the trouble, Pedro? Flapjacks getting busy?" and Thure turned a grinning face to the Mexican.

"No. Pack slip and pinch finger in rope. Now all right," and the smile came back on Pedro's face.

But Thure noticed that the scowl returned again and again to his face that forenoon, as he walked along by the side of the pack-horses.

"Reckon the break in his sleep has made him cross," he thought, and gave the matter no more attention.

At noon, when they stopped to give horses and selves a short rest and a chance to eat their dinners, Pedro slipped off behind a rock for some ten minutes; and, when the journey was resumed, he lagged a little behind the others, pretending to be tighten-

ing one of the packs, and, once again, managed to slip, unseen, a little piece of paper under a stone and leave it near the camp-fire over which Mrs. Dickson had heated the coffee. This little feat seemed to fully restore his good-nature; for there were no more scowls on his face that day.

About the middle of the afternoon Dickson halted, where the stream along whose bank they had been walking for the last two hours forked, one branch flowing almost directly from the north and the other, coming from the east, with a huge triangle of mountains widening out between them.

"Thither runs the trail to Humbug Canyon," and he pointed to the northern stream; "and thither runs the trail to Owl Gulch," and his finger turned to the eastern branch. "We are now about two hours from Humbug Canyon and some four hours from Owl Gulch. Remember I am not absolutely sure I can find the trail the other side of Humbug Canyon; but I think I can. Stackpole and I went by way of the canyon. Now, which shall it be?"

"Owl Gulch," answered Mr. Conroyal promptly. "I reckon we can find the trail all right again—Hi, there, Pedro, what sort of a heathenish charm is that you are making?" and he turned abruptly to Pedro, who the moment they had stopped had begun scratching curious lines with his knife on the face of a soft rock, by the side of which they had halted.

"Si, señor," and Pedro turned a solemn face to Mr. Conroyal, "'tis but a holy cross I am cutting

to scare the devils away from following us up that evil-smelling stream," and he pointed to the east fork of the little river, from which arose a faint odor.

"Wal," grinned Ham, "I shore dew hope that you scare 'em away; for thar shore is devils a-follerin' us," and his grin broadened at sight of the startled look that came into Pedro's face.

"*Madre de Dios!*" and Pedro crossed himself swiftly.

"But, even a devil must cotch a feller afore he can run his pitchfork intew him," and Ham chuckled; "an' we ain't cotched yit. As for that thar stream," and he chuckled again, "th' devil once took a drink out of it, an' it's smelt of his breath ever since."

"There, that will do, Ham," laughed Mr. Conroyal. "Come on," and he started up the east fork of the river.

Pedro, the snaky look in his eyes showing more plainly than ever, swiftly cut a small arrow, with its head pointing up the east fork of the rivulet, underneath the cross, slipped the knife back into its sheath, and followed with the pack-horses, his sallow face now all smiles. Evidently he had explicit faith in the power of his charm to keep the devils from following them up the evil-smelling stream.

That night our friends camped in Owl Gulch, a steep, narrow defile, little more than a crack in the huge walls of surrounding rock; and the next day,

after much arduous and violent climbing for horses and men up the gulch and over the low back of a mountain, they passed down into a quiet little valley, just as the sun sank behind the tops of the mountains to the west.

The moment Dickson entered the valley he uttered an exclamation of pleasure.

"Hurrah!" he cried. "We've hit the trail again! I am sure this is the little valley where Stackpole and I camped the first night out from Humbug Canyon. There should be a spring bubbling out of the ground at the point of that spur of rocks where you see that little grove of trees," and he pointed to a small grove of trees that clustered about the point of a ridge of rocks that projected, like a long bony finger, from the side of the surrounding mountains down into the little valley. "We made our camp in the grove. I'll know the place for sure when we get there by a tree that Stackpole girdled," and, accompanied by Thure and Bud, he started on the run for the little grove of trees now about half a mile away.

In a few minutes the three reached the trees. The spring was there! By its side stood a tall sycamore tree, dead, its trunk having been girdled by an ax, as the deep scars in its bark still plainly showed.

"There," and Dickson pointed triumphantly to the tree, "there is my witness, the very tree that Stackpole girdled, in order that he might have plenty of dry wood the next time that he camped here. And see," and he pointed excitedly to the blackened re-

mains of a camp-fire that did not look to be many weeks old, "there is where he camped on his way back from the Cave of Gold. We sure are in luck!" and he turned to shout the good news to the others, who were now pushing their way eagerly through the trees.

"Here is where we camp for the night," declared Mr. Conroyal, when the excitement and the jubilation of the discovery that they were surely on the right trail again had somewhat quieted down; and all at once began joyfully preparing the camp for the night.

"It's queer how things dew turn out sometimes," philosophized Ham, when all were seated around a blazing camp-fire, built from the limbs of the dead sycamore, after the supper had been eaten and all the camp duties attended to. "Th' miner that murdered that tree, jest so that he might have dry wood, was murdered himself, jest for his gold; an' here we be a-settin' around an' takin' comfort from a camp-fire built from th' dead limbs of th' dead miner's dead tree, an' bound on a hunt for th' dead miner's gold. Wal, I shore hopes we have better luck than he did."

"Oh, shut up, Ham!" and Rex threw a discarded flapjack at Ham's head, with such good aim that it landed squarely over his big mouth. "You are enough to give the dumps to a man with the tooth-ache."

When the laugh that followed this admirable use

of valuable ammunition had quieted down, Dickson turned to Mr. Conroyal.

"I think I would like to have another look at that skin map," he said.

"Certain, get the map, Thure," and Mr. Conroyal turned to Thure.

Thure hesitated a moment, and then, catching sight of Mrs. Dickson's little tent and receiving a smiling nod from her, he quickly entered the tent, and a few minutes later came out with the skin map in his hand, and handed it to Mr. Dickson.

Pedro, who was standing near, washing the few supper dishes in a gold-pan, started a little and almost visibly pricked up his ears at the first mention of the skin map, and his evil eyes followed Thure into the tent, with an intensity of look that was well for him was unseen by his employers.

Dickson took the map and spread it out on his knees, where the light of the camp-fire shone full upon it; and soon all were gathered around him, yes, all, even Pedro, who had softly left his dish washing and tip-toeing up to the heads bending absorbedly over the map, was now striving to secure a glimpse of the skin map directly from over the big shoulders of Ham.

Suddenly Ham straightened up his huge frame, with such a sudden jerk, that one of his shoulders came in so violent a contact with the point of Pedro's chin that the Mexican was lifted off his feet and thrown flat on his back to the ground.

"Wal, I'll be durned!" and Ham stared down in astonishment on the fallen Mexican. "Thought I heer'd someone breathin' over my shoulder. Now what might you be dewin' down thar?" and the eyes that glared down into Pedro's face began to glow angrily.

"I—I" stammered Pedro, as he staggered a little dizzily to his feet, both hands holding onto his head. "I but try to see what make so great interest to señors, when sudden up comes that great body and hit chin, like bunt of big bull, and knock head to ground. I did but follow my head, señor."

"Jest follered y'ur head, did you?" and Ham's anger vanished in roars of laughter, at the words of the unfortunate Mexican and the looks on his face, in which he was heartily joined by all the others, all except Mrs. Dickson, who inquired solicitously of Pedro if he was much hurt.

But Pedro's curiosity for the moment was fully satisfied, and, without making any reply, except to mutter something about American bulls under his breath, he retreated to his dish washing.

"Sarved him right," declared Ham emphatically, as all again resumed their examination of the skin map.

When the map had been sufficiently examined, Thure again retired into Mrs. Dickson's tent, where he again concealed the map in the bosom of his shirt; and when he came out again, apparently without the map, Pedro smiled knowingly.

Before going to her tent that night Mrs. Dickson sang a number of songs, and almost weirdly beautiful her voice sounded in the still night air of that little wilderness valley, concluding with Ham's favorite "Ben Bolt." Then she bade them all good-night and disappeared into her little tent.

Mr. Dickson and Thure were to stand guard that night until the moon came up, which would be about one o'clock in the morning. Consequently, as soon as Mrs. Dickson retired, all but these two rolled themselves up in their blankets near the camp-fire and were soon sound asleep. Thure and Dickson each picked up his rifle and took his station on opposite sides of the camp and began his long silent vigil.

The skies were overcast with clouds and the darkness was so dense that the watchers could not see six feet outside of the constantly dimming circle of the firelight. In a couple of hours the fire had burnt down so low, that, from where Thure stood near the horses, he could not even see the white of Mrs. Dickson's tent, although it was not over ten yards from where he stood; and he was about to step forward to replenish it, when a dark object leaped by him, so close that he could have touched it with his outstretched rifle, and disappeared in the darkness before he could utter a word or throw his gun to his shoulder, and the next instant the air was rent by a piercing shriek from Pedro, followed by the flash and the report of his pistol and his yells of fright.

In an instant every man in the camp was on his feet, his rifle in his hands, calling excitedly: "What is the trouble?" "What has happened?" and running to where Pedro was rolling about on the ground, calling on all the saints in the Mexican calendar to protect him, seemingly frantic with fear.

"Stop that yellin', you Mexican coyote, an' tell us what has happened, quick," and Ham bent down and, seizing the squirming Pedro by the shoulders, jerked him to his feet and dragged him unceremoniously to the camp-fire, which an armful of dry fuel caused to blaze up brightly.

"*Madre de Dios!* I know not! I know not!" cried the man, glaring wildly about him and clinging to Ham. "Unless it was the devil of these evil mountains. I lay sleeping, rolled up in my blanket, when,—poof!—something hit my side and something big and ugly tumble all over me and I see something black and awful jump in the darkness and I grab my pistol I always sleep with me in blanket and shoot—bang!—and the big black thing give one great jump and vanish, just like a black devil, in the darkness. *Santissima!* I know not what he was, if he was not the devil! I—"

"I saw him rush by me so close that I might have touched him with my rifle," here broke in Thure; "but, before I could speak or shoot, he had disappeared in the darkness, and then came Pedro's shot and yells."

"Look to the horses!" cried Mr. Conroyal. "See that everything is safe!"

At that moment Dickson appeared in the circle of light made by the camp-fire.

"All the horses are safe," he said. "Nothing appears to be missing. What does all this excitement mean? I saw nothing, heard nothing, until the shooting and yelling began—" He stopped abruptly and glanced swiftly around. "Mollie! Where's Mollie?" and he sprang toward the tent.

"Gosh! I plumb forgot th' Leetle Woman! She shore otter have showed up afore this," and Ham's face whitened, as his eyes followed Dickson into the little tent.

The fire was now burning so brightly that the tent showed plainly in its ruddy light; and the eyes of all fixed themselves on it, a look of dreadful apprehension on each whitening face.

For a moment all was silent after Dickson disappeared in the tent; and then came a yell of horror that made every man jump for the tent, just as Dickson staggered out with a squirming bundle in his arms, that he quickly laid down on the ground and began frantically untying the deerskin thongs with which it was tightly bound.

"Great God, if 'tain't th' Leetle Woman!" and Ham bent excitedly and with his knife began cutting the thongs, which bound Mrs. Dickson, head and all, in her own blanket as tightly as an Egyptian mummy.

In a moment her body was free; but, when the blanket was lifted from her face, her mouth was found to be so tightly stuffed, with a piece of cloth torn from her own dress, that she could not utter an audible sound. Dickson's strong fingers quickly pulled the cloth out of her mouth; and she lay, white and gasping for breath, but apparently unhurt, staring up wildly into the faces of the excited men.

"Take her into the tent, Dick, until she recovers from her fright and rough usage," whispered Mr. Conroyal, bending close to Dickson's ear.

Dickson quickly lifted his wife into his arms and carried her into the tent.

"Who did it?" and Mr. Conroyal's eyes searched anxiously the angry and mystified faces of the men, the moment Mr. Dickson vanished with his burden in the tent.

"Th' Lord alone knows for sart'in," answered Ham. "But, I reckon, 'twas one of them durned skunks. Jest wait 'til th' Leetle Woman gits tew feelin' like herself ag'in an' maybe she can give us some useful information."

But, in this conjecture, Ham was wrong; for, when something like half an hour later, Mrs. Dickson came out the tent, leaning on her husband's arm and looking very white, but otherwise little the worse for her experience, all the information she could give only added to the mystery.

She had been sound asleep when the attack was made. The first thing she knew a hand held her

by the throat, so tightly that she could not utter a sound; and, when she opened her mouth, gasping vainly for breath, it was instantly stuffed full of rags, so firmly that she could not utter a loud sound. Then the hand was taken from her throat, her arms pressed closely to her sides, and she was tightly rolled up in her own blanket, head and all, and tied the way they had found her. For some little time after that she heard her assailant cautiously searching the tent. He appeared to be exceedingly anxious to find something; for every possible hiding-place in the tent had been thoroughly searched and every package or bundle had been opened. When the search was over, she heard the intruder creep softly out of the tent. Then had followed a few minutes of silence broken suddenly by Pedro's yells and shot. Owing to the darkness and to the fact that her eyes had been covered as quickly as possible, she could not give any idea of what her assailant looked like, only she did not think he was a large man.

This was all the information that Mrs. Dickson could give; and a thorough search of the tent with a torch added nothing to it.

Thure and Pedro were again examined; but they could give no definite information. Thure had only caught a glimpse of the man, as he had rushed by him in the darkness; and Pedro appeared to have been too nearly frightened out of his wits to have seen anything correctly, even if it had been clear

daylight, instead of the black night that it was. However both disagreed with Mrs. Dickson in one particular. Thure felt quite sure that the man who rushed by him was a large man; and Pedro was positive that he was a giant in size. Dickson had not seen the man at all. The horses and the packs, indeed the whole camp, were thoroughly examined with lighted torches; but nothing was found missing, nothing had even been disturbed outside of Mrs. Dickson's tent, and from here, so far as they could discover, not a thing had been taken.

"It's 'bout as plain as th' nose on a man's face that he was after th' skin map," Ham commented, when all had again gathered around the camp-fire to consider the mystery; "but, why should he look for it in th' tent? an' how did he git in thar? that's what gits me," and Ham shook his head. "Wal, thar is no use figgerin' on it any longer tew-night. Let's git back intew our blankets; an' maybe we can see things clearer in th' mornin'. It's tew tarnel dark even tew think," and Ham laid down on his blanket and rolled himself up in it and refused to have another word to say about the mystery that night.

"Reckon Ham is right," Mr. Conroyal declared, as that worthy disappeared in his blanket. "But I sure would like to have a look at the man, who can creep into our camp at night, right under the noses of the guards, and tie one of us up in a blanket,

and search a tent, and make a clean getaway. I sure would like to have a look at that man."

"I'd want more than a look," and Mr. Dickson clenched both his hands. "I'd just like to get hold of him for about five minutes, the scoundrel!"

"And you are not the only one, Dick," and an angry light flashed into Mr. Conroyal's eyes. "But, what's the use! He's got away; and without leaving a clue, so far as I can see. Let's get into our blankets. Maybe, as Ham says, we can see clearer in the morning. Good night," and Mr. Conroyal turned to his blanket, followed by all the others, except Bud and Mr. Randolph, who were to act as guards during the remainder of the night.

CHAPTER XXIII

ON THE SHORE OF GOOSE NECK LAKE

THE next morning the camp was again thoroughly examined; but no clues to the identity of the intruder of the night before could be found, nor could they follow his trail beyond the spot where he had apparently stumbled over Pedro. Here the ground, which happened to be a little soft, plainly showed where he had fallen and jumped to his feet and leaped off in the direction of the point of rocks, but farther than this it was impossible to trail him on account of the hardness of the ground. There was absolutely nothing more that they could do; for it would be useless to attempt to run him down in that wilderness of mountains; and they were obliged to leave the mystery of the tent; it was a great mystery to those strong watchful men how the gagging and the binding of Mrs. Dickson had been so quietly and effectively accomplished, unsolved for the present.

“Don’t look much as if we’d thrown th’ cunnin’ devils off our trail, does it?” Ham grumbled, as our little company again started on their journey. “’Pears like as if we’d had all our trouble for our pains so far. Wal, they didn’t git th’ skin map;

but it shows they shore could have got it, if they'd knowed whar it was," and his face clouded. "They might have sneaked up ahind Dickson or Thure jest as easy an' knocked 'em senseless an' bound an' gagged 'em. Reckon we've got tew be more keerful or they'll git th' map yit. 'Bout how much longer will it take us tew git tew that thar canyon?" and he turned anxiously to Mr. Dickson.

"We ought to make it in three days sure," answered Dickson. "Stackpole and I did it in a little over two days from here; but, on account of the pack-horses, it will probably take us a little longer."

"Shore you remember th' trail?"

"Yes," and Dickson's eyes turned northward. "Now that I am on the ground, things come back to me. See that opening between those two mountains?" and Dickson pointed to a ravine-like depression between two mountains some four or five miles away. "Well, I know we went up that ravine, because Stackpole pointed it out to me right from here, just as I am pointing it out to you; and that ravine, after a couple of miles, widens out into quite a little valley, with the mountain, called Three Tree Mountain on the map, near its upper end."

"Wal, we shore was in luck, Dick, when we took you intew th' partnership," Ham declared heartily; "for, I reckon, we'd had a durned long hunt a-findin' our way jest by that map, but now all we've got tew do is jest tew foller y'ur lead. Wal, lead on," and he grinned.

Dickson proved that his memory of the trail was correct; for, after they had entered the ravine between the two mountains and had gone up it for a couple of miles, it opened out into a beautiful little valley; and there, near its upper end, stood a huge round-topped mountain, bald of head, except for three tall trees that stood out against the horizon like three lonely sentinels.

"Hurrah!" yelled Thure, the moment his eyes caught sight of this mountain. "There is Three Tree Mountain! We sure are on the right trail. Bully for Dickson!"

Our friends now had passed beyond the realm of the hitherto ubiquitous miner. The wilderness was supreme. Everywhere around them mountains and forests and valleys and streams stood unchanged, as they came from the hand of God.

Game of all kinds was abundant. Bud shot a young buck elk, which they ate for supper, when they went into camp for the night at the foot of Three Tree Mountain.

The guard was doubled that night and the camp-fire was kept blazing brightly, so that no one could creep into camp unseen under cover of the darkness. These precautions proved effectual; and the night was passed without alarm.

Dickson found no trouble in following the trail during the day. At every turning point some remembered landmark would show him the right way to go. A short time before night they passed

over a ridge of rocks and looked down into a quiet little valley, near the center of which lay a beautiful little lake.

"Behold!" cried Dickson, pointing to the water, that shone like red gold in the red rays of the setting sun. "Behold, Goose Neck Lake! It was while standing at this very spot and looking down on the peculiar necklike bend of the lake, that Stackpole gave it the name, Goose Neck Lake. There is a little grove of trees on its north shore that will make us a fine camping place. And tomorrow afternoon sometime we should be in Lot's Canyon! Come on," and he hurried down the ridge toward the lake.

It was dark when they reached the north shore of the lake and pitched their camp in the little grove of trees. All were in high spirits; for on the morrow they would be in Lot's Canyon, almost at their journey's end, almost within reach of the Cave of Gold!

For the last two days they had not seen nor heard a sign of their enemies and they were beginning to hope that, in the maze of deep gulches and ravines and little mountain-enclosed valleys through which they had been passing, they had given them the slip, and this hope added to their cheer. Consequently the little group that gathered around the camp-fire that night was unusually merry—all except Pedro, who went about his camp duties with a sullen troubled look on his face.

Ever since the night Mrs. Dickson had been found tightly bound in her tent, his face had worn a troubled expression and his eyes were continually turning to Thure, with a wondering questioning look in them, as if there were something about the boy that he could not understand; and every time he had heard the name of the skin map mentioned he had become instantly alert, but always in such a way as not to attract attention in his direction. Now, on this night, his was the only gloomy face in the company.

"Looks as if we had given th' skunks th' slip at last," Ham said, as he seated himself on his blanket, spread near the blazing fire, and leaned back comfortably on his elbow. "An' I don't wonder; for I don't believe even Kit Carson himself could have kept on our trail through all them short twistin' gulches an' thick woods, through which we've ben passin' for th' past tew days. Howsomever, I reckon, we hadn't better let up none on th' caution bus'ness—But, let us forgit them skunks an' turn our minds tew more pleasant things, like a song from th' Leetle Woman," and he turned to Mrs. Dickson. "I jest sorter feel hungry for music to-night. Please sing 'Old Dan Tucker,' an' 'Th' Emergrants Lament' an'—"

"'Ben Bolt,'" laughed Thure.

"Shore," grinned Ham. "I couldn't go tew sleep without hearin' 'Ben Bolt,' but let us have 'Old Dan Tucker' first."

Mrs. Dickson was in splendid voice that night and sang with unusual fervor, even for her; and the men kept begging her for "just one more song," until, at last, with a laugh, she declared she just couldn't sing another song, and, bidding them all good night, hurried into her tent.

The guard was again doubled that night and instructed to keep the camp-fire blazing brightly. Hammer Jones, Frank Holt, Mr. Randolph, and Dill Conroyal, were to keep the first watch, through the darkest hours of the night, before the moon came up. The night was clear and the starlight bright enough to make objects dimly visible a few rods away. The grove where they were encamped was not large and the guards were stationed in its outskirts, where they could patrol all around it.

Hammer Jones' post was near the horses, on the opposite side of the grove from the lake. About twenty rods from him, out on the open valley stood a large tree, with three or four smaller trees growing around it. In the starlight he could see the outlines of these trees dimly. He stationed himself in the dark shadows of a large tree, where he could keep one eye on the horses and the camp, illuminated by the blazing camp-fire, and the other on the surrounding valley.

For a couple of hours he neither saw nor heard a suspicious sign or sound. Then from the little clump of trees came the hoot of an owl that caused him to straighten up quickly and to listen intently.

Ham had spent the greater part of his life in the wilderness; and the voices of its wild dwellers were as familiar to him as were the voices of his fellow men; and something in the first hoot of that owl had awakened his suspicions. It did not sound exactly right. There was a false quaver at the end. In a minute the hoot was repeated, still with that unnatural quaver at its end.

Along the outskirts of the grove grew a thin line of short bushes. Ham now bent down until his form was hidden by these bushes, and began creeping slowly and very cautiously toward the clump of trees. In this way he was able to get some three or four rods nearer to the spot that had awakened his suspicions. During this cautious forward movement the hoot of the owl had been repeated three times, at intervals of about a minute, and the same false note had been sounded each time.

"I'd bet th' last coonskin in my pack that that's no owl hootin'," Ham muttered softly to himself, fixing his eyes intently on the dark shadows underneath the trees.

Suddenly he fancied he saw one of the shadows move.

"By gum, I'll chance a shot!" and swiftly throwing his rifle to his shoulder, he fired at the spot where he thought he had seen the shadow move.

There was a faint sound, like a smothered exclamation; and then all was still in the little grove

of trees, nor could Ham's straining eyes detect any further movements.

But his shot had aroused the camp; and now all the men, except the guard, came running to him, their rifles in their hands, excitedly calling to know what was the matter.

"Jest a suspicious hoot of an owl an' a movin' shader," answered Ham. "I reckon thar was one of them durned skunks a-hidin' in that clump of trees, a-callin' out some signal; an' I shouldn't be none s'prised if my bullet pinked him. Leastwise I thought I heer'd a smothered cry."

"Get torches and we will see," cried Mr. Conroyal excitedly. "Maybe you got him, Ham."

Thure and Bud hurried to the camp-fire and soon were back with blazing pine torches in their hands.

There were no hostile Indians in that part of the country, and they knew that Ugger and his gang could not be there yet in sufficient force to dare venture to attack them, so they did not fear to advance on the little clump of trees with lighted torches in their hands.

There were three small trees and the one large tree and a few low bushes in the clump. The ground around these was as carefully searched as was possible by the light of the torches; but not a sign of Ham's human owl did they find.

"Must have been a real owl after all, Ham," Mr. Conroyal said, as he was about to give up the search and to return to the camp.

But, at this moment, Thure uttered a startled exclamation and, bending quickly, picked up something from the ground and held it up where the light of the torches showed it plainly to all.

It was a little finger freshly severed from a left hand!

"Marked him! By gum, I marked him!" cried Ham exultingly.

"You sure did, Ham," and Mr. Conroyal bent hastily and examined the finger carefully. "It came from the hand of a white man all right," he declared. "And the hand of rather a small man, the left hand. Well, you will know your man the next time you see him, Ham."

"I shore will," grinned Ham. "An', if I dew, I wants tew return him his finger; so I'll jest take charge of that leetle bit of anatominy," and, reaching out, he took the finger from Thure, and, carefully wrapping it up in a piece of buckskin, thrust it into one of his pockets. "Wal, th' excitement is all over now, boys, an' you can return tew y'ur downy couches an' soft pillers. I reckon thar won't be no more owl hootin' tew-night, leastwise not from that bird," and Ham chuckled.

All now returned to the camp and to their blankets; and Ham resumed his watch in the dark shadows under the big tree.

Ham was right. There was no more owl hooting that night. But the finding of that finger had brought uneasy thoughts to all. Evidently they

had not succeeded in throwing their cunning enemies off the trail. And now, here they were within a few hours' march of Lot's Canyon, of the Cave of Gold, and with the scoundrels still hot on their track! What was to be done? How could they now hope to throw Ugger and his men off their trail, when all their efforts so far had been in vain? Indeed, how had Ugger and his men been able to keep on their trail, through all the maze of mountains and forests and winding gulches and twisting ravines through which they had been passing? That was a great mystery to all—to all, except Pedro.

CHAPTER XXIV

IN LOT'S CANYON

THE next morning, just as they were about to start on their way Mr. Conroyal called the little company together.

"You all know what happened last night, and what it means," he said. "In spite of all our efforts to throw them off, that Ugger gang apparently are still on our trail. Now, Dickson says that we can make Lot's Canyon this afternoon; but, if we do, them skunks will be sure to follow us and to find it, too. Under such circumstances what shall we do? Shall we try again to fool them, by not going straight to the canyon to-day and see if we can't slip into it to-night without being seen? Or, shall we defy them, and march straight for the canyon, without any effort to hide our trail?"

"That last plan hits my bull's-eye," declared Ham emphatically. "If they want tew foller, let 'em foller. If they want tew fight, we'll give 'em all th' fight they want," and Ham's lips closed grimly. "I'm tired of tryin' tew dodge th' dirty sneakin' murderin' pack of cowards any longer. I gives my vote for marchin' as straight tew Lot's Canyon as th' good Lord an' Dickson can take us."

"Bully for Ham!" shouted Bud enthusiastically. "I vote with Ham," and he sprang to Ham's side.

"So do I," and Thure followed him.

"Me, too," and, with a laugh, Mrs. Dickson took her stand by the side of the boys.

And, with a cheer, all the others joined her.

"Reckon that means, straight for Lot's Canyon. Lead on," and Mr. Conroyal turned to Dickson.

Until about noon the trail wound around great hills of rocks, and in and out of deep gulches and rocky defiles, and over high ridges of rock; and then, just as the sun was nearing the meridian, it entered a broad mountain-enclosed valley, some six or seven miles long by about two miles wide. Near the upper end of the valley a tall pinnacle of rocks shot up into the sky, like a church steeple, at the head of what looked like an almost precipitous mass of rocks that rose many hundreds of feet above the level of the valley.

"See that rock?" and Dickson pointed triumphantly to the steeple-like rock at the head of the valley.

"Shore, not bein' blind," Ham answered. "What might it be doin' thar?" and he grinned.

"That rock," and Dickson paused to glance around the circle of faces that now surrounded him, "stands within half a mile of the Devil's Slide, which is the only way down into Lot's Canyon. Boys, we should be in Lot's Canyon in two hours!"

"Hurrah!" yelled Thure.

"Hurrah!" echoed Bud.

"Come on," cried Mr. Conroyal. "The sooner we get there the better. Pedro, see if you can't liven up them pack-horses a little."

"Si, si, señor," and Pedro began hurling volleys of Mexican oaths at the pack-horses and running from one to another of them, striking with his whip and urging with his voice, until the patient animals were moving as fast as the safety of their packs would permit.

Pedro appeared to be in unusually good spirits that day. All the gloom of the day before had vanished with the dawning of the morning of the night of the hooting owl.

In an hour and a half, so eagerly did they press forward, our little company had passed the steeple-like pinnacle of rocks; and in another fifteen minutes they had climbed to the top of a ridge of rocks, and were looking down a steep, narrow declivity, cut by the wonderous hand of nature, in a precipitous wall of solid rock that rose from the bottom of a canyon five hundred feet below them. The smooth floor of the declivity was not over a dozen feet wide and shot downward at an angle of about forty-five degrees.

"Gosh! I don't wonder Stackpole called that Th' Devil's Slide," and Ham's eyes stared down the steep slope of the declivity. "Ain't thar no other way of gettin' down thar intew that thar canyon?" and he turned to Dickson.

"Not that I know of," Dickson answered. "That was the way Stackpole and I went. It is not as difficult as it looks. The rock is not slippery, and, by being careful, a man can get down all right. But the horses! I don't know about them," and he glanced a little dubiously toward the six horses.

"We'll have to use ropes on them," declared Mr. Conroyal. "Two men to a horse. Get out the ropes."

In a few minutes five strong ropes had been secured from the packs, and preparations were immediately begun for helping the horses down the slide.

There were ten men in the company, including Pedro, and this enabled them to start all the pack-horses at the same time down the declivity. The method of procedure was simple. The middle of a strong rope some thirty feet long was placed under the neck of a horse and across the breast and fastened there, so that it could not slip down. Then two men took hold of the rope, one at each end, and, by walking a little behind and on opposite sides of the horse, they were in position to hold back the animal, should he start to slide or get to going too fast. In this way and with very little trouble, for the footing down the declivity was much better than they expected it would be, they soon had the six horses safely down the Devil's Slide.

All now stood at the bottom of a deep canyon, with walls of nearly perpendicular rock rising on

both sides from five hundred to a thousand feet above their heads. The bottom was strewn with rocks of all shapes and sizes, and little clumps of trees and bushes grew here and there.

"This," and Dickson glanced a bit dramatically around him, "is Lot's Canyon. The white pillar of rock, called Lot's Wife on the map, is about a couple of miles farther up the canyon, and near it stands the Big Tree, and close by that tree, according to the map, should be the hidden entrance to Crooked Arm Gulch. And it must be well-hidden too; for, when I was with Stackpole, we couldn't find a sign of a gulch near the Big Tree, although I remember we looked especially sharp for it right there, because the Indian had told Stackpole that it was near a big tree and that was the biggest tree we could find in the canyon. I hope we have better luck."

"Let us hurry and get to the Big Tree," cried Thure impatiently. "I am sure that, if there is any entrance to any gulch there, some of us can find it. Come on," and the excited boy, with Bud by his side, started up the canyon.

Rex and Dill and Mr. Dickson at once joined the two boys, and the five hurried eagerly forward, leaving the others to come on more slowly with Pedro and the horses.

The canyon was from one hundred to two hundred feet wide at the bottom, and twisted and wound along between its gigantic walls of rock, like a huge

serpent. Doubtless in some far distant age it had been the course of a mighty river; but now not a drop of water flowed along its rocky bottom and evidently had not for hundreds of years.

"Looks like a mighty good place for grizzlies," commented Rex, as they hurried along over the rough rocks of the bottom.

"And there has been one here not many minutes ago," supplemented Dill, pointing to the bark of a tree that had been freshly torn by the sharp claws of some powerful animal.

"And there he is!" cried Thure, as they made a sudden turn around a huge point of rocks, projecting a few feet out into the canyon, and came face to face with a huge male grizzly not a hundred feet away.

The grizzly appeared to be very greatly astonished at this sudden invasion of man into his hitherto undisputed realm of rocks, and a little offended. With a deep bass-drum-like "huff, huff," he reared his huge body up on his hind legs, and, turning his wicked little eyes on them, uttered a deep warning growl, as much as to say: "Now, if you men will turn right around and go back, I will not harm you."

"Shall we shoot?" asked Thure, cocking his rifle.

"No, not if the brute will get out of our way," answered Rex. "We have no time to fool with grizzlies," and, cocking his own rifle, he started straight toward the grizzly.

The growl of the bear deepened, and he made no sign of giving way to the intruders.

"All right, old man," and Rex stopped and threw his rifle to his shoulder. "Stand ready to fire, if my bullet fails to bring him down," he warned, as his eye glanced swiftly along the rifle barrel.

But Rex Holt was one of the best rifle shots in California, and knew exactly where to send his bullet in order to make it instantly fatal; and there was no need of a second shot, for almost at the instant of the crack of his rifle, the huge beast, with a deep startled, "huff," and a staggering leap toward them, tumbled sprawlingly to the ground, as if all his tough muscles had been suddenly turned to hot tallow, and with a few quiverings, the great frame lay still.

"No time to bother with him now. Let him lay there for the present. Come on," and Rex, pausing by the side of the grizzly only long enough to assure himself that the monster was dead, hurried on up the canyon.

For half an hour longer they struggled on over the broken rocks that covered the bottom of the canyon; and then they came to where the canyon made an abrupt turn, and, widening out a little, ran straight ahead for half a mile or more.

The moment they made this turn and looked up the clear stretch of canyon, all uttered a shout of triumph. Some two hundred yards from them and

near the east wall of the canyon grew a huge oak tree; and, perhaps a hundred yards farther up the canyon, stood a tall pillar of white rock.

"The Big Tree!" yelled Thure exultingly, starting on the run for the tree.

"Lot's Wife!" shouted Bud, racing along after Thure.

Rex and Dill and Dickson hastened after the excited boys; and, in a few minutes, all stood beneath the giant branches of the great oak.

The tree was some seventy-five feet high and nearly as broad as it was high; and its huge trunk grew so close to the wall of the canyon that the ends of its great limbs on that side had been pressed tight up against the rocks.

"Well, we are here at last!" Thure's face was flushed and his eyes were sparkling with excitement. "Now, for the hidden entrance to Crooked Arm Gulch!" and his eyes turned eagerly to the walls of the canyon.

The wall of the canyon near the tree, so far as their eyes could judge, was a solid mass of cracked and seamed rocks, that sprang from the bottom of the canyon almost straight upward for five hundred or more feet. There did not appear to be break or opening of any kind, nor did it look as if there ever had been such an opening.

For half an hour the two boys and Rex and Dill and Mr. Dickson searched excitedly up and down

the wall of the canyon near the tree, without one of them finding the first sign of an entrance to the hidden gulch.

"Great Moses, but this is exasperating!" complained Thure, staring indignantly at the blank walls of rock. "To be held up like this, when almost at the entrance to the Cave of Gold! But we have got to find it," and the heat of his excitement having cooled down a little, he began a more careful and systematic search of the face of the wall of rock.

"Found it?" yelled Ham, who at this moment came round the turn in the canyon at the head of the remainder of the company.

"No," Dickson called back. "Not a sign of an opening anywhere in sight."

"I reckon this is where our trouble begins," Ham declared a few minutes later, when he stood near the Big Tree and searched the precipitous side of the wall of rock vainly with his keen eyes. "It shore don't look as if there ever had ben any gulch entrance thar."

"Let us have another look at the map," suggested Mr. Conroyal, after all had searched the face of the wall of rock in vain for some time. "Possibly we have overlooked some little point of guidance on it."

Thure at once procured the map and handed it to his father; and all crowded anxiously around

him, as he seated himself on a rock and spread the map out on his knees.

"This sure must be the right place," he declared, as he glanced down at the map and then up and down the canyon; "for here is the Big Tree and there," and he pointed to the white pillar, "is Lot's Wife, and that slide down there must surely have been the Devil's Slide; and, if this is the right place, then the entrance to Crooked Arm Gulch must be right there, according to this map," and he pointed to the wall of rock against which the great limbs of the tree were pressing.

"Wal, it ain't thar," and Ham turned away disgustedly from the map. "Any fool with eyes in his head can see that it ain't thar. I reckon we've come on a wild-goose chase. Let's go intew camp an' git some grub down us. I'm allfired hungry, an' it's tew late tew look any more tew-day," and he glanced toward the west wall of the canyon, up the side of which the shadows of night were already beginning to creep. "Possibly we can dew better in th' mornin', though it's more'n I can see how, seein' that thar's nuthin' but th' face of a solid wall of rock tew search; an' we've searched 'bout every inch of that that we can a'ready," and he threw his big frame down on the ground and stared at the wall of rock wrathfully.

And much of the same disappointment and disgust that troubled Ham was troubling the hearts

of all; for it did not seem possible that there could be any entrance to any gulch anywhere near the Big Tree. The wall of rock was too steep to climb, but the eye could search its entire face, except where the limbs of the giant oak hid a few square yards of the surface, and nowhere was there a break in the wall nor the least sign of an opening of any sort, let alone the entrance to a gulch. This was so plainly evident, so easily and so quickly to be seen, for the smooth face of the wall of a canyon offers few opportunities of concealment, that the gloom of bitter disappointment deadened the spirits of all; and, consequently, it was a very downhearted and discouraged company of men that now started to make ready for the night under the overhanging branches of the Big Tree.

All the next day the search was continued, but without any results.

"Durn th' old map! Let's throw it intew th' fire an' git back tew th' diggin's," Ham declared wrathfully, as they gathered for the night under the Big Tree. "Stackpole shore must have been loony when he made that map."

"Reckon you are right," agreed Mr. Conroyal. "Well, we'll have another look at the map; and, if we can't get any new ideas from it, we will do as you say and start back for the diggings in the morning."

"No; no! Just one more day! Let us look one more day!" pleaded Thure. "I can't believe that

Stackpole did not find that Cave of Gold. He was so sure of it, so earnest about it—and there is the nugget and the gold he had with him when murdered! Let us look just one more day!”

“Well, son, I am sure that we all are just as anxious to find that Cave of Gold as you can possibly be; but, where can we look that we have not already looked? What is the use of going over exactly the same ground that we have already been over many times? It isn't a question of sticking. I'd say stick as long as there was any hope. But, as Ham says, any fool with eyes in his head can see that there is no gulch opening here. Either Stackpole was crazy, or we've struck the wrong canyon; and, in either case, we might just as well give up the search and get back where we know there is gold. However, I will put the matter to a vote; and we will do as the majority wishes. Shall we start back for the diggings in the morning? All in favor of starting back in the morning stand up,” and Mr. Conroyal's eyes glanced over the little company seated around him.

All arose slowly to their feet, except Thure and Bud, who looked almost ready to cry at this untimely ending of all their romantic dreams.

“I know it is hard, hard on us all, and especially hard on you two boys,” Mr. Conroyal said, turning sympathetically to the lads. “But it would be foolish to waste any more time here. Now, let us have a last look at that map, before we fling the

cussed thing into the fire," and he motioned Thure to hand him the skin map. "We don't want it to fool anybody else."

Thure slowly took the map from its place of concealment in his shirt bosom and reluctantly handed it to his father. Then all bent their heads over it; but there was little interest in their faces. They had examined the map too often and too closely to hope to find anything new in it now.

Suddenly Mrs. Dickson uttered a little exclamation and pointed with her finger to the roughly drawn tree in the left hand corner of the map.

"I wonder if that tree, with the arrow pointing downward toward the east point of the cross, does not mean something," she said.

"Moses!" yelled Thure, jumping to his feet excitedly. "It does! It's the key to the whole secret! I remember now! The miner said the gulch was blocked by great rocks, that we must climb the Big Tree to the third limb. You remember, don't you, Bud?" and he turned excitedly to Bud.

"Yes," answered Bud, now as greatly excited as was Thure himself. "He said, 'Climb to the third limb. Remember, climb to the third limb—third—third—' and then he choked all up. Come! It is yet light enough to see!" and both boys made a jump for the huge trunk of the great oak tree and began climbing up it almost with the agility of two squirrels.

"Gosh! Thar might be somethin' in that!" and

Ham, and all the others, jumped to their feet and followed the movements of the two boys with deeply interested eyes.

The third limb was about twenty feet from the ground, of huge size and thrust itself straight out to the rocky wall of the canyon, against which its end appeared to be tightly pressed.

Along this limb Thure and Bud now scrambled, as swiftly as hands and feet and body could propel them, Thure in the lead. The limb was sufficiently large and strong to make this neither difficult nor dangerous. In a few minutes they were at the face of the wall of rock. Here Thure paused for a moment, then he was seen to rise on his feet, push a few branches aside, and, with a yell, disappear. The next moment he was followed by Bud.

"Wal, I'll be teetotally durned!" and Ham and the others stared blankly at the spot where the two boys had disappeared.

For five minutes they stood staring at the spot, without speaking a word, so intense was their interest. Then the heads of the two boys appeared through the branches almost simultaneously; and a loud yell of triumph broke wildly from the mouth of each.

"Found! Found!" yelled Thure.

"We've found the gulch! Crooked Arm Gulch!" cried Bud. "Come up and see."

"Durned if I don't!" and Ham leaped for the trunk of the tree, followed by every other man in

the company, except Pedro, who, together with Mrs. Dickson, remained below.

"Not too many on the limb at a time," cautioned Rex, who had succeeded in reaching the third limb first. "It might break," and he began working his way along it, closely followed by Dill.

In a couple of minutes he had reached the opening in the wall of rock, a jagged hole some four or five feet in diameter, into which the sturdy limb had thrust itself in such a manner that its branches completely concealed all signs of the opening from below.

"Great! This is great!" Rex exclaimed, as he pushed his way through the branches into the hole.

In a few minutes more all were through the hole, and were standing on a narrow shelf of rock, looking down into a deep, narrow gulch, whose bottom was considerably below the level of the bottom of Lot's Canyon.

"By gum! if we ain't struck th' right spot at last!" and Ham stared in astonishment up the gulch to where it made a bend, like a crook at the elbow in a man's bent arm. "Thar's th' Golden Elbow," and he pointed to the bend; "an' this shore must be Crooked Arm Gulch. Wal, this is what I call luck! Hurra!" and he swung his hat around his head and yelled at the very top of his strong lungs; and every man there joined with him in the yell; and the rocky walls of the narrow gulch echoed and reëchoed the sound, until it seemed as if a

hundred men were shouting their joyous yells of triumph.

"Too bad it is so late in the day that we must put off exploring the gulch until to-morrow," Mr. Conroyal lamented, when the excitement had somewhat quieted down.

"Oh, dad, just let us see if the cave is really there!" begged Thure.

"Impossible. See how swiftly the dark shadows of night are gathering. We must hasten back to Lot's Canyon at once. In fifteen minutes it will be too dark to see our way plainly. Come on, everybody. I reckon the Little Woman is some curious to know what has been happening up here," and, smiling happily, he started back toward the opening, followed by all the others.

When they again reached the ground at the bottom of the Big Tree, they found Mrs. Dickson alone. She said that Pedro had asked permission to go back to where the grizzly bear had been killed to get a chunk of bear steak for their supper, and had hurried off, taking one of their rifles with him, as soon as she had said yes. She was nearly wild with joy, when told of the find they had made, and vowed that she would go with them in the morning, when they started out to look for the Cave of Gold, in spite of the seemingly dangerous climb along the big limb of the Big Tree.

Half an hour later Pedro returned with a big chunk of bear meat, which was soon roasting

on wooden spits placed around the blazing camp-fire.

That was as joyful an evening as the night before had been gloomy. Even the saturnine spirits of Pedro seemed greatly affected by the general hilarity; for his sallow face was all smiles and his little black eyes snapped and twinkled, as he passed hither and thither among the men, and he was very careful to place the pan in which he washed the dishes within easy hearing distance of every word they might utter. Indeed, it seemed almost impossible for him to tear himself away from the sound of their voices; and, when he was compelled to go to the little spring they had discovered some twenty rods distant from the Big Tree, after water, he had gone there and back on the run, as if he was fearful that something might be said while he was away that he ought to hear. But, to all this, our friends gave no heed, save that Ham once or twice turned his eyes on Pedro's excited face, with just a flicker of suspicion in them.

"Wal, I don't wonder he's some excited, seein' us so upset," he thought. "Still thar won't be no harm in keepin' as much as possible from him. I don't believe in trustin' a Mexican nohow, any more than you've got tew," and Ham lowered his own voice and cautioned the others to do likewise, when Pedro was near. "Jest tew be on the safe side," he explained.

"We must de doubly cautious now," warned Mr.

Conroyal, when they made ready for bed, "and keep somebody on guard night and day all the time; for now that we have found the secret of Crooked Arm Gulch them devils are likely to be down upon us at the first unguarded moment. We will put four men on guard again to-night. Rex, you and Dill and Bud and his father can stand guard for the first half of the night; and you can call Ham and Frank and Thure and me to relieve you about one o'clock. Now, get to your stations and we will get to our blankets. Good night, everybody," and he began rolling himself up in his blanket.

An example that all except the guards followed very speedily.

CHAPTER XXV,

THE CAVE OF GOLD

THERE were no disturbances during the night; and the dawn of the next morning found everybody up and awaiting eagerly the moment when there would be sufficient light in the canyon to make the climbing of the Big Tree and the entrance into Crooked Arm Gulch safe. At last Mr. Conroyal declared that the great moment had come.

“But,” and he glanced around the little group of eager faces, “Ham and I think, and I am sure you will all agree with us when you stop to consider the matter, that we ought to leave at least one man here to stand guard with Pedro. Now, under the circumstances, I had rather not say who that man shall be, but will ask for a volunteer. Who is willing to offer himself up as a sacrifice to the good of the public?” and Mr. Conroyal smiled.

For a moment all stood staring blankly into one another’s faces. No one appeared to be in the least anxious to make this sacrifice. And no wonder! For, now at the very moment they were about to explore the mysteries of the dead miner’s wonderful Cave of Gold, who would care to be left behind?

Then, with a smile on his face, Frank Holt stepped forth.

"Reckon I'll stay and keep company with Pedro," he said. "I'm not as young as I once was, and crawling along that limb some twenty feet above the ground looks some dangerous to legs as old as mine. But I'd like to have one of you, if you find the cave all right, come and let me know," and the sparkle in his eyes told how great was his interest in the result.

"I'll come right back and relieve you, dad, just as soon as we find the cave and see what it is like," Rex Holt promised. "Then you can go and see for yourself. It was great of you to offer to stay. I'll be back soon. Good-by," and he hurried after the others, who were already climbing the Big Tree.

Pedro, all the morning, had been as feverish with excitement as had any of the others, and had watched their every movement, as a cat watches a caught mouse, and had tried to overhear every word uttered; but, at the first mention of a guard being left with him, he had muttered a Mexican oath and had turned angrily and sullenly away, all his excitement gone. Evidently he had counted a great deal on being left alone with the horses and the camp supplies, when the search for the Cave of Gold was made; and, consequently, the leaving of a guard with him had been a very great disappointment. But he was too cunning to allow this dis-

appointment to be seen by his employers, and had turned quickly away to hide his feelings, until he was again his usual suave self; and so he did not hear the promise of Rex to hasten back as soon as the cave was found and relieve his father.

You may be sure that there were no laggards among the climbers up the Big Tree and along the limb and through the entrance into Crooked Arm Gulch; and soon all stood on the little shelf of rock; from which they had had their first view of the gulch the night before.

"Now, th' first thing tew dew is tew git down tew th' bottom," commented Ham, as the eyes of all eagerly searched the walls of the gulch.

"That looks easy! Right this way!" and Thure began excitedly clambering down the rocks.

The shelf of rock on which they stood was some fifty feet above the bottom of the gulch; and from it a series of shelves and jutting rocks made an easy pathway downward, for mountaineers as experienced as they were, and soon all our friends stood at the bottom of Crooked Arm Gulch.

"Now for the Golden Elbow!" shouted Thure. "I want to be the first one in the Cave of Gold," and he started up the gulch as fast as he could go, jumping and climbing over the rocks that nearly covered its bottom.

"Same here!" and, with a yell, Bud started after him.

In a moment all, even the gray-haired men, had

joined madly in the race. Evidently Thure was not the only one who wished to be the first in the Cave of Gold.

The gulch was narrow, only about a couple of rods wide at the place where our friends had reached the bottom, and, some three hundred yards from here, it made a turn, like the crook in a man's bent arm. This was evidently the Golden Elbow, and the point for which all were racing.

Thure, owing to his start and his long legs, was the first to reach this spot, but Bud was not six feet behind him. Then came Rex and Dill and the others, with Dickson and his wife pantingly bringing up the rear. All had stopped directly in front of the point of the turn, and now stood staring excitedly around them, looking for the entrance to the Cave of Gold and looking in vain.

In front of them the wall of the gulch had been hollowed out into a great overhanging arch, seventy-five or more feet in height and some fifteen feet deep.

Could this be the miner's Cave of Gold?

Surely not; for there was no need of torch here, and the bottom certainly was not covered with gold nuggets, but with hundreds of pieces of broken rock, some of them as large as two strong men could lift.

"Wal, I swun, if it don't look as if we was up ag'in it ag'in," and Ham stared excitedly around. "But, if thar is any cave here, it must be right in thar. Come, git busy," and he began clambering

over the rocks toward the back wall of the arch. "I'll bet a coonskin that I can find it first."

"Take you!" shouted Thure and Bud, both clambering swiftly after him.

In a minute more all were searching excitedly for the hidden entrance to the cave, along the entire back wall of the arch; but the rocks of the bottom seemed to meet a solid wall of rock at the back.

"Say, but isn't it enough to make even a Job swear to be held up like this, right at the most exciting moment!" and Thure stopped in front of a large flat rock, that had fallen so that it stood nearly on edge, leaning against the back wall of the arch. "Come, give me a hand; and let's see what is behind this rock," and he turned to Bud, who stood near him. "It looks almost as if it might have been stood up there on purpose."

In a moment the strong arms of the two boys were tugging at the huge slab of rock; and, at last, with a mighty effort, they pulled it away from the wall and toppled it over backward, and it fell, with a crash, on the rocks between them, revealing a black opening in the solid rock.

"Hurrah!" yelled Bud.

"Found!" shouted Thure; and both excited boys made a dive for the hole, with the result that their bodies stuck tightly in the opening, the hole not being large enough to accommodate the entrance of both of them at the same time.

Ham and Mr. Conroyal pulled them out; and

then Ham thrust his big body into the opening—he could just squeeze in—and began cautiously working his way forward. It was not a venture for an excited boy to make, the entrance into that black hole without a light.

In about five minutes Ham came backing hurriedly out.

“Who’s got th’ candles?” he cried excitedly. “Thar sart’in is a cave in thar; but it is as dark as the bottomless pit. We must have lights before we can enter. Give me a candle.”

“Here, here they are!” and Mr. Conroyal who in the excitement of the moment had forgotten the package of a couple of dozen candles he had tied up and slung over his back just before climbing the tree that morning, quickly swung the package down on a rock in front of him and cut the strings.

Ham caught up one of the candles, and, hurriedly lighting it, again crawled into the hole, holding the candle out in front of him.

Thure and Bud both caught up candles and lighting them, looked imploringly at their fathers.

Both men nodded, and the boys dove into the hole; but this time separately.

“The rest of us had better wait outside until we hear from Ham and the boys,” Mr. Conroyal said, staring anxiously into the hole.

For perhaps ten minutes, although to the anxious and excited watchers outside it seemed more like an hour, not a sound came from the hole into whose

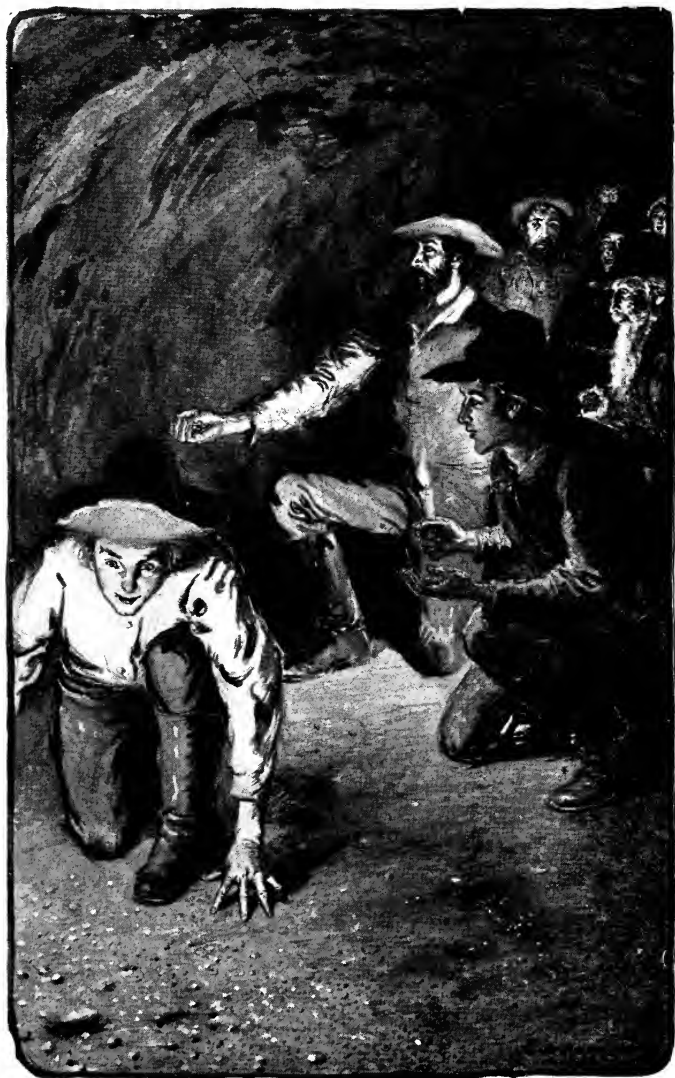
black depths the three men had vanished. Even the lights of their candles had disappeared. Then, suddenly, the excited voice of Thure was heard, booming out through the hole.

"It's the cave, the Cave of Gold!" he cried exultantly, his voice trembling with excitement. "Come in, all of you. There is room for all. I will hold my candle so that you can see."

"Here, Dickson, you go first, and, Mollie, you follow right behind him," and Mr. Conroyal pushed Mr. and Mrs. Dickson excitedly toward the cave opening, and motioned Rex and Dill and Mr. Randolph to follow them, he himself entering last.

The hole slanted downward for some ten feet, then, enlarging a little, turned to the right and ran straight ahead for some thirty feet, still slanting quite steeply downward, when it suddenly opened out into a large chamber, worn by the action of water, apparently, out of the solid rock.

In five minutes all our excited friends stood in this chamber or cave and were staring wonderingly around them. They found themselves in a room, some thirty feet long by twenty feet wide at the widest, with an oval slanting roof, shaped something like the inverted quarter of an egg-shell. The bottom of the cave was level and composed of a very coarse gravel, mixed with little rounded chunks of a yellowish metal, that glowed in the light of the candles like thousands of dull yellow coals of fire.



"IT IS GOLD! IT IS GOLD! AND ENOUGH OF IT TO MAKE US ALL RICH
BEYOND OUR FONDEST DREAMS."

In an instant everybody was down on their knees examining these chunks of metal. For a couple of minutes no one spoke. Then Ham lifted his head and looked slowly around him, as if he were trying to convince himself that he was really awake.

"Gosh!" he said, in a voice hardly above a whisper. "It is gold!"

"It is gold!" and Mr. Conroyal looked up, his face white and his eyes shining. "It is gold; and enough of it to make us all rich beyond our fondest dreams. No wonder the miner called it the Cave of Gold."

"Gold! Gold! Now Ruth shall have her breast-pin nugget and gold necklace!" and Thure, with hands that trembled so that he could hardly hold the candle, began an excited search for the largest chunk of gold that he could find. In two minutes he had found one about the size and the shape of a robin's egg. "The very thing!" he cried. "That will make a magnificent breastpin," and he quickly picked it up and began searching for the nuggets to go into the promised necklace.

During this time Bud was quickly gathering up the largest nuggets he could find; for a similar purpose but for a different girl; and the fingers of all the others were busy in the same exciting way.

For half an hour all forgot everything, but the shining pellets that covered the bottom of the cave. Then Rex suddenly straightened up.

"Great Washington! I'm forgetting dad!" he

exclaimed. "I must go to dad at once," and he started for the hole that gave passageway to the outer world.

Naturally Rex was greatly excited and made all possible haste to get back to his father with the good news. The distance was not great, and in ten minutes he had reached the hidden entrance to Crooked Arm Gulch, and, hurriedly crawling through the narrow opening, he pushed the concealing branches aside—and found himself looking directly into the red face of Bill Ugger.

"God in heaven!" and Rex struck out with all the strength of his strong right arm.

The face was not three feet away and the blow landed squarely on the broken nose. There was a low cry, the crash of broken branches, and the huge body of Bill Ugger plunged downward from the limb.

For an instant Rex stared blankly after the body; and then, suddenly realizing the value of every moment, if they would not all be caught in a trap from which there would be no escape, he whirled about and raced back to the Cave of Gold, almost wild with the thought of what might happen, if the gang of robbers should capture their horses and supplies and hold them captive in Crooked Arm Gulch, as they could easily do, once they secured possession of the Big Tree. Then there was his father. What had happened to him? No wonder his face went white, and he risked limb and life a

dozen times in his mad scramble down the rocks and up the gulch and into the opening of the Cave of Gold.

"Quick! Everybody, back to the Big Tree!" he shouted, as he plunged into the cave, where our excited friends were still busily picking up the nuggets. "The robbers! They have got dad! Quick!" and he whirled about and rushed back.

In an instant the gold was forgotten. Every man jumped for his rifle, which had been left near the entrance to the cave, and sprang after Rex, leaving the startled and frightened Mrs. Dickson to follow as best she could.

There was not one of them but understood on the instant the seriousness of their peril. If the robbers secured their horses and supplies and held the entrance to Crooked Arm Gulch, they would be absolutely at their mercy; for, so far as they knew, the only way out of the gulch was by way of the Big Tree, and half a dozen men, armed with rifles, could hold this narrow opening against their most desperate efforts to get out, and in a few days, could starve them into surrender, for they had no food with them. They must at all costs, if it was not already too late, keep the entrance to Crooked Arm Gulch from falling into the hands of the robbers.

Hammer Jones, by desperate efforts, reached the side of Rex, just as he was about to plunge into the passageway between Crooked Arm Gulch and Lot's Canyon; and one of his great hands closed down on

the excited man's shoulder just in time to stop the reckless act.

"Cautious! Cautious!" warned Ham, as he jerked Rex back. "If them skunks have got th' camp, 'twill be death to sot foot on that big limb."

"But, dad—"

"'Twon't help him none for you tew git killed. I'll take a look first," and the great strength of Ham forced Rex back, while he himself began cautiously, yet rapidly, crawling through the narrow opening.

In a moment he had reached the limb of the Big Tree, and, carefully parting the branches so as to make no noise, he cautiously looked down.

The camp had been pitched under the Big Tree almost directly beneath him; and the first look showed him everything apparently safe and undisturbed. The next look—and, with the cry: "Come on, everybody, as quick as th' Lord will let you," he sprang out on the limb and began working his way down the tree so recklessly that more than once he was in danger of falling. The moment he reached the ground he leaped toward an object that lay tightly bound up in a blanket on the ground near the trunk of the tree; and, with a swift hand began cutting the ropes that were tightly wound around it from head to foot, in a manner exactly similar to that in which they had found Mrs. Dickson on the night she had been so mysteriously bound in her tent.

By the time Rex had reached his side he had uncovered Frank Holt, with his hands bound behind him and a gag in his mouth, but otherwise unhurt, except for a big lump on the back of his head. In a moment more Rex had pulled the gag out of his father's mouth and Ham had freed his hands.

"Pedro!" Holt gasped and staggered a little dizzily to his feet. "He struck me down from behind, and tied and gagged me, as you found me. Where is Pedro?" and he looked excitedly and a bit wildly around. "Ah, now I remember," and his face cleared. "He has gone for the rest of the gang. I overheard him and another man, after I had recovered my senses and lay tightly bound up in the blanket, planning how he would go and get the rest of the gang, while the other man climbed the tree and kept guard over the narrow opening. Their plan was to capture the camp and hold the Big Tree, so that none of you could get out of Crooked Arm Gulch, and then starve you into surrendering everything; and they came mighty nigh doing it," and he glanced anxiously down the canyon. "They'll be due in about half an hour, I judge from what I overheard. They were not calculating on any of you getting back so soon," and he smiled grimly.

"But that other man? Where is that other man?" and Mr. Conroyal—by this time all, even Mrs. Dickson, had made their way down the Big Tree—looked anxiously around.

Rex started and glanced quickly toward the wall of the canyon, directly under the opening to Crooked Arm Gulch; and then his face cleared.

"I reckon that's him," and he pointed to a huddled heap that lay on the rocks. "I knocked him off the limb of the Big Tree. But, we had better make sure he is where he can do no harm," and he hurried to the body. "Dead as a stone. Neck broken," he declared, as he turned the corpse over.

"Broken-nose! It's Broken-nose!" and Thure, who had hurried up with Rex, started back, as the man's face came into view.

"Wal, th' world's better off by havin' one less scoundrel in it," and Ham scowled down on the face of Bill Ugger, ugly and repulsive even in death. "Now," and he turned quickly to Holt, "didn't you say that thar Mexican skunk, Pedro, had gone tew git th' rest of th' gang?"

"Yes," answered Holt; "and we must be ready for them, when they get here. They are camped down near the Devil's Slide; and I calculate it will take them about half an hour yet to get here."

"An' the skunks are a-calculatin' on findin' th' camp unguarded?" and Ham's eyes began to twinkle brightly.

"Yes, I heard Pedro tell the other fellow that he felt quite sure none of us would be back for two hours or more; but, to make things safe, Broken-nose, as Thure calls him, said he'd climb the tree and knock the head off anyone that tried to come

through the narrow opening into Crooked Arm Gulch. I reckon Rex got there just at the right moment to spoil that little game."

"I certainly did," and Rex smiled grimly. "A minute later, and he would have got me, instead of my getting him. But, we must be getting ready for the return of Pedro," and his eyes glanced anxiously down the canyon.

"Say," and Ham turned to Conroyal, "why can't we give them th' same kind of a s'prise they was a-calculatin' on givin' us? They ain't expectin' tew find us here, an' will come a rushin' up unsuspecting-like, an', if we hide, we can give 'em a mighty warm reception a-fore they know what's happenin'."

"Bully! Where'll we hide?" and Mr. Conroyal glanced eagerly around. "There, those rocks will be just the place," and he pointed up the canyon to where a row of big rocks stood up, almost like a rampart, something like a hundred feet from the Big Tree. "Now we must leave the camp looking just as it was when Pedro left it. Here, somebody, quick, we'll tie the body of Ugger up in the blanket, and leave it where we found Frank. That will sure fool them," and he hurried to where the corpse of Ugger lay; and, in a few minutes, the body was tightly bound up in a blanket and laid down on the exact spot where Ham had found Holt.

"All got plenty of powder and lead?" and Mr. Conroyal glanced swiftly from man to man.

All answered in the affirmative.

"Then get behind the rocks," and, with a final look around the camp to see that every suspicious sign had been removed, Mr. Conroyal led his little company to the rocky rampart to await the coming of Pedro and the band of robbers; and soon all had vanished from the sight of anyone coming up the canyon.

In front of them and the Big Tree there was a space some three hundred feet wide, clear of trees or underbrush or rocks large enough to shield a man.

"We will wait for them until they get out into the open," Mr. Conroyal said, pointing to this space. "Now everybody see that his rifle and pistols and knife are ready; and remember to keep down out of sight and on no account to fire until I give the word."

They did not have long to wait; for hardly had Mr. Conroyal uttered his last words of warning, when they saw Pedro coming around the bend in the canyon some two hundred yards below them. At first Pedro advanced very cautiously, darting from rock to rock and keeping his body concealed as much as possible; but, at last, coming to where he could get a clear view of the camp and seeing nothing to awaken his suspicions, he appeared to be satisfied that all was safe and turned and began beckoning excitedly with both his hands. In response a little company of heavily armed men instantly sprang into sight, coming from around the

bend in the canyon, and hurried up to where Pedro stood awaiting them.

For two or three minutes they stood there, while Pedro, gesticulating excitedly and frequently pointing toward the quiet-seeming little camp under the Big Tree, appeared to be explaining the situation to them. Then all began advancing cautiously, yet rapidly toward the Big Tree, taking advantage of the rocks and trees and bushes to conceal their movements as much as possible.

"Here they come!" whispered Thure excitedly to Bud, as the men began their advance. He had his eye to a little opening between the two adjoining rocks behind which the boys were crouching. "I counted twenty of them and I think there are one or two more. Say, but won't we give them a big surprise?"

"You bet!" and Bud's jaws came together grimly.

"Keep down! Everybody keep down!" warned Mr. Conroyal in a whisper. "Don't shoot, until I give the order; and then jump to your feet and pick your man and fire as quick as the Lord will let you; but, be sure you have got the bead on the man before you pull the trigger. We must down as many of them as possible at the first volley. Now, everybody get ready. They will be out in the open in a minute or two," and he turned to give his attention to the advancing robbers.

By this time Pedro and his men had reached the line of rocks and bushes that faced the opening in

front of the rocks behind which our friends lay concealed; and here they paused for a moment, each man behind a rock, and searched with careful eyes the camp under the Big Tree.

"There's Pockface!" excitedly whispered Bud, who now had his eye to the crack between the two stones, "behind that big rock straight in front of us, the skunk. Now, just wait, until we get the order to fire," and his lips closed tightly.

At this moment Ham, who crouched behind a rock by the side of Mr. Conroyal, whispered:

"I'll be durned if I don't believe we can capture the hull caboodle, if we jest wait 'til they git 'most up tew us, an' then jump up sudden an' point our guns at them an' yell, 'hands up!' an' that'll be a heap better'n tew let half on 'em git away tew bother us all the way back tew civilerzation."

"Right, I believe you are right. Anyway we will try it. Watch them, while I give the right instructions," and Mr. Conroyal crept swiftly to near the center of the little group behind the rampart of rocks.

"Men," he said, speaking low, yet loud enough for all to hear, "we are going to try to capture the whole bunch of scoundrels. At the word, every one of you jump to his feet and point his rifle at the skunks and yell 'Hands UP!' I reckon that will bring every hand up; but, if it don't and any of them act suspicious or make a break, shoot quick, and shoot to kill. Do you all understand?"

All nodded and Mr. Conroyal returned at once to his place by the side of Ham.

At this moment the robbers broke from the rocks and ran swiftly out into the open toward the Big Tree.

"Ready, everybody ready!" whispered Mr. Conroyal.

On came the robbers, until they were within seventy-five feet of the rocks behind which our friends were hiding.

"Now!" yelled Mr. Conroyal, and leaped to his feet, and leveled his rifle. "Hands UP!" he commanded.

And almost at the same moment all the others, —even Mrs. Dickson—leaped to their feet, and leveled their rifles, and yelled: "Hands UP!"

The robbers stopped, as if they had suddenly run into a stone wall, turned their startled eyes on the leveled rifles and the stern-faced men back of them —and then, every hand went up, as if worked by one shaft of machinery, every hand except the hands of Pockface, who, doubtless thinking that his capture would mean death anyway, whirled about suddenly and leaped toward the rocks behind him.

At the same instant Ham's rifle cracked; and the legs of Pockface doubled up under him, and he went down, like a shot rabbit.

That was enough for the rest of the men.

"Don't shoot. We surrender," they all yelled,

holding their hands as high as they could above their heads.

"Rex, you and Dill get their guns and knives. The rest of you keep them covered with your rifles," commanded Mr. Conroyal.

Rex and Dill, with broad grins on their faces, instantly stepped forth, and soon had all the weapons of the robbers safely confiscated.

Fifteen minutes later, every robber lay on his back under the Big Tree, his hands and feet firmly bound with strong ropes. There were twenty-one of them; and our friends were too wise to take any needless chances.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE CATASTROPHE

“**N**OW, the question is, what shall we do with our captives?” and Mr. Conroyal glanced a little anxiously around the circle of faces that had gathered about him, a short time after all the robbers had been safely bound. “We cannot hang them, as they deserve, and we have not food enough to keep them, and it will be hardly safe to turn them loose. What do you think we had better do, Ham?” and he turned to Hammer Jones.

“First off,” answered Ham, “we’d better make a raid on their camp an’ git all their hosses an’ supplies. Maybe that’ll answer th’ food question; for, I reckon, they must have come well supplied, seein’ that Ugger an’ Quinley would have plenty of gold-dust tew buy with.”

“Good,” promptly declared Mr. Conroyal. “You and Rex and Dill and Dickson make that raid at once on their camp, which, I fancy, you will find somewhere near the Devil’s Slide.”

Ham proved to be right; for, when he and the men who went with him, returned from the raid, some two hours later, they had with them fifteen horses, ten of which were heavily laden with food

and other camp supplies, and one prisoner, the man who had been left to guard the camp.

"Now, I reckon, we've got them all, twenty-tew livin' an' tew dead," Ham declared, as he bound his prisoner and placed him with the other captives: "an' right whar we can keep them out of mischief. Thar's plenty of food for all, Con," and he turned to Conroyal, "leastwise for a few days, so th' food problem is settled. Now, what are you proposin' of dewin'? We want tew git th' gold an' git out of here as soon as we can," and he lowered his voice.

"I can't see but one thing for us to do, Ham," Mr. Conroyal answered, "and that is to keep a guard over the prisoners, while the rest of us get the gold out; and then, when we've got the gold, to turn them loose in the mountains, without weapons or horses, and make for home as fast as we can. We've been considering the problem, while you were after the horses and camp supplies, and that is the conclusion that we have come to. How does it strike you?"

"'Bout right, under th' circumstances," answered Ham. "An' th' sooner we git things a-goin' ag'in th' better. I'm gettin' some anxious tew git back intew that cave."

"We'll get busy at once," declared Mr. Conroyal. "But first, I reckon, we ought to bury them two corpses. 'Twouldn't be Christian to leave them to rot a-top the ground or to be ate up by wolves."

"Shore," agreed Ham. "Come on, Rex. We're th' responsible fellers, an', I reckon, it's up tew us

tew dig th' grave. We'll put 'em both in one grave," and he picked up a pick and shovel and started to where the body of Quinley lay.

In a short time the two men had the grave dug.

"Now for the bodies," and Ham caught hold of Quinley and turned the body over. "Wal, I swun!" and he stared down at the left hand. The little finger had been recently shot away and the wound was still roughly bandaged. "So y'ur th' feller that I owe a finger tew. Wal, here it is," and he thrust his hand into his pocket and pulled out the little buckskin-wrapped parcel, containing the little finger that he had shot from the unknown hand the night they were encamped on the shore of Goose Neck Lake, and laid it down on the corpse.

"Now, I reckon, we'll have to see if you have any of that stolen gold-dust left," and Ham began a search of the body, which resulted in the finding of a heavily laden gold-belt buckled around the waist, next to the skin.

Ham at once appropriated this; and then the two men lowered the body into the grave. A similar belt, also well-filled with gold-dust, was found around the body of Bill Ugger. Ham unbuckled this belt and placed it with the other. Then he and Rex lifted the body of Ugger and carried it to the grave and lowered it down on top of the body of Quinley; and then filled the grave with broken pieces of rocks and dirt, to prevent the wolves from digging up the bodies.

"Th' way of th' transgressor is hard, accordin' tew th' good book," and Ham's eyes rested thoughtfully on that lonely new-made grave. "An' shore th' end of them tew 'pears tew bear out th' good book. Wal, th' dead is dead, an' that's all thar is tew it. Now, for th' livin'," and he turned from the grave and walked up to where Mr. and Mrs. Dickson were standing, the two confiscated gold-belts in his hand.

"Here, Dick, I reckon, is a part of th' gold them skunks got from you," and he handed the two belts to Dickson. "Leastwise we got them from their bodies."

But Mr. and Mrs. Dickson refused to take the gold and insisted that it be placed in the common fund, to be shared by all alike, so Ham turned the two gold-belts over to Mr. Conroyal.

The camp was now placed under the strictest discipline. Ten of the prisoners were compelled to assist in getting the gold from the cave. The others were kept bound and under constant guard, night and day, all except Pedro, who, during the day, was forced to do the cooking and the camp work for all, while at night he was securely bound and returned to his place with the other prisoners.

Thus the work of getting the gold out of the cave went steadily on for five days, every one, even Mrs. Dickson, working to the very limit of his or her endurance. Then came the night of the catastrophe.

The gold, as fast as it was taken out of the cave,

was carried, in sacks made from blankets, to the opening in the wall of rock that gave entrance to Crooked Arm Gulch, and from there lowered to the ground with ropes. Each night all the workers returned to the camp under the Big Tree. On this night, the sixth night from the day of the finding of the Cave of Gold, about midnight, there suddenly swept through the air above them one of those rare, for that time of the year, but often very violent, mountain storms.

For an hour the water fell out of the skies, as if poured from an enormous bucket. The wind blew, until it seemed almost to shake the solid mountains themselves, while vivid glares of lightning blinded the eyes and heavy peals of thunder deafened the ears. Then came a lull in the violence of the storm, as if the elements had paused to gather themselves for a last supreme effort, followed almost instantly by a glare of lightning so vivid, that, for the moment, it seemed as if the whole world was ablaze, and a shock of thunder, so appalling, that everyone leaped from his blanket and stood staring with blanched face and frightened eyes around him, not knowing what awful thing was happening. For two or three minutes the dreadful sounds continued, as if mountains were being torn up by the roots and thrown crashing to the earth again, while the ground shook and trembled beneath their feet, as if the earth had the ague. Then, only the roar of the falling rain and the rushing of the wind through the

limbs of the Big Tree above their heads, was heard. Fifteen minutes later the rain had ceased, the wind had died down, the clouds had swept by, and the stars were shining again in a clear sky.

The next morning, when our friends, on their way to the Cave of Gold, reached the narrow shelf of rock in Crooked Arm Gulch, from which they had had their first view of the Golden Elbow, an astonishing sight met their eyes.

The great arch, overhanging the entrance to the Cave of Gold, with its millions of tons of superincumbent rocks, had given away, and the whole of that side of the gulch, nearly a thousand feet high and for a couple of hundred feet on either side, had split off and fallen in a great mass of rocks, hundreds of feet high, where the day before had been the entrance to the dead miner's marvelous Cave of Gold.

For a number of minutes all stood staring at this unexpected and astounding sight in awed silence. No wonder it had sounded the night before as if mountains were being torn up and thrown down again! No wonder the ground beneath them had shook and trembled from the impact of those millions of tons of rocks!

"Gosh! I'm glad I ain't in that Cave of Gold!" and Ham turned an awed face to the others. "If that storm had comed up in th' daytime, some on us might be in thar right now. I reckon we've got

all th' gold th' Lord intended us tew git, an' now we'd better git for home."

"Well, if that was the Lord's work, He has been mighty accommodating to wait until we got all the gold we need," and Mr. Conroyal smiled. "I was thinking last night that we had about enough, and had better be starting for home. Mighty curious place, that Cave of Gold; and I have been wondering quite a bit how the gold got into it; and this is about the way I figure it out:

"Thousands of years ago, how many thousands God alone knows, there must have been a great river pouring through Lot's Canyon, with its bed hundreds of feet below the present bottom of the canyon; and, at that time, there must also have been a powerful stream of water flowing through this gulch, and emptying into the river in Lot's Canyon, through a great hole worn through the solid wall of rock, which is now completely hidden under the rocks that have fallen down into the gulch during the ages since both rivers dried up. Now, in making that turn," and he pointed to where the Golden Elbow had been, "I figure that the water struck a soft ledge of gold-bearing rock, and gradually scooped out a big cave right in the point of the turn, and, of course, as the gold was washed out of the rock, it would fall to the bottom of the cave, and, being in quite large chunks, it was too heavy for the action of the water to carry it out of

the cave, while the water would carry out nearly all the other dirt and gravel, thus leaving the bottom of the cave covered with gold nuggets, the way we found it. And, after the river had dried up, rocks from the arch at the entrance to the cave would fall off, and little by little fill up the entrance and form the big arch we found. Now, that's about the way the gold came into the cave, according to my figuring. What's your idea, Rad?" and Mr. Conroyal turned to Rad Randolph.

"I think that you've hit it about right, Con," answered Mr. Randolph. "But, now that there is no hope of getting any more gold out of that cave, I am getting powerful anxious to make a start for home with what we have got. Let's go back to the Big Tree at once and get agoing homeward as soon as we can."

"Hurrah for home!" yelled Thure, starting for the opening out of Crooked Arm Gulch. "I'd rather see home now than another Cave of Gold."

In a few minutes all were back in the camp under the Big Tree; and preparations for the start homeward were begun at once.

In three hours everything was ready for the journey. The gold, there was fifty bags of it, each weighing about one hundred pounds, was packed on the fifteen horses they had secured from the robbers. Mrs. Dickson was given one of the other horses to ride, and the food and the camp supplies were packed on the remaining five horses.

The twenty-two prisoners were now all gathered in a bunch under the Big Tree, and the hands of each man strongly tied behind his back. Then Mr. Conroyal stepped out in front of them.

"You cowardly pack of scoundrels," he said, "if we could, we would gladly take you to where we could deliver you up to the justice you so richly deserve; but, under existing circumstances, that is impossible; and so we have decided to leave you here, bound as you now are, without weapons of any kind, but with food enough to last you three days, which ought to be enough to keep you until you can get to one of the mining-camps. Doubtless, by working real hard, you can manage to get the hands of one of you untied in course of the next two or three hours, and then he can soon untie the hands of the others, and you can start for one of the mining-camps as soon as you please. But," Mr. Conroyal spoke slowly, so that every man could understand every word that he uttered, "do not, if you value your lives, follow our trail. We will shoot, and shoot to kill, on sight. Now, that is all I have to say to you, except," and he grinned joyously, "to thank you for bringing us those fifteen horses and for your help in getting out the gold. I do not know what we would have done without the horses and without your help. Hope this will learn you to give up trying to steal gold and start you to digging for it," and he turned and led the little company down the canyon, bound, at last, for home.

CHAPTER XXVII

HOME

TEN days later than the events just recorded in the last chapter, Iola Conroyal and Ruth Randolph sat swinging in a hammock, stretched under the broad porch that shaded the front of the Conroyal house.

"I wish we could hear from our dads and the boys," Iola said, as the two girls swung gently back and forth. "It seems like a long time now since Thure and Bud left us; and we haven't heard a word from them since they went away; and so many things might have happened to them. Why, they may already have found the Cave of Gold, and right at this moment they may be picking up gold nuggets by the basketful!" and her dark eyes sparkled at the thought.

"Yes," it has been a long time since we heard from the mines," answered Ruth; "and our mothers are beginning to worry, more than they let us know. They are afraid that the hunt for the Cave of Gold will get them into some kind of trouble with the men who murdered the old miner for the skin map, and then failed to get it. And—and not to hear a word from them, when so many things might happen, is

terrible worrying. Oh, I do hope they find that Cave of Gold, and get enough gold to make us rich all the rest of our lives!" and her face brightened. "That is the way it would come out in a story book; and I can't see why it can't happen that way in real life, just this once. I dreamt, only last night, that they came back with a string of horses a mile long and all of them loaded down with gold. And—and," and her face flushed a little, "Thure brought me a nugget as big as my head, and a necklace of nuggets that reached to the ground, when he threw it around my neck. Oh, if something like that would only happen in real life!" and she laughed merrily at her own extravagant conceit.

"And I dreamt—" and then Iola stopped abruptly.

A faint halloo, coming from far-off, at this moment had reached the ears of both girls, and brought them out of the hammock in one jump, and turned their two pairs of eyes to staring excitedly across the level of the valley in front of the house.

A mile away they saw two horsemen, swinging their hats around their heads and hallooing loudly, riding excitedly toward the house; and back of them came a long train of horses and men.

For a minute the two girls stood, as if turned to stone, staring with widening eyes at those two horsemen, at the train of horses and men behind them; and then, with a yell that made their mothers jump from the chairs where they were sitting in the cool of the house and rush to the door, they

leaped off the porch and ran toward the two horsemen.

"It's Thure and Bud! It's dad and the rest!" they shouted, as they ran.

In a few minutes the racing boys—for the two horsemen were Thure and Bud—and the running girls met.

The boys jumped from their saddles, and, the next instant, they were in the arms of the girls.

"We found it! We found it!" shouted Thure, a moment later, dancing up and down with excitement. "We found the Cave of Gold! And here," and he thrust one of his hands into his pocket, "is your breastpin nugget!" and he handed the big gold nugget he had found to Ruth. "And here is your necklace of gold nuggets!" and he threw over the happy girl's head and around her neck a long string of gold nuggets that he had strung on a deer sinew, during the homeward journey.

Bud, during this time, had been going through the same delightful performance with Iola.

That was the most wonderful night in the history of the Conroyal and the Randolph households!

First, of course, after the greetings were over, the gold had to be taken off the horses and carried into the house and piled up in the center of the floor of the big room; and then, with all of the two families and all of the friends who took part in the search for the Cave of Gold, not forgetting you may be sure Mr. and Mrs. Dickson, seated in a circle

around the piled-up bags of gold, the story of the adventures of Thure and Bud and the finding of the dead miner's marvelous Cave of Gold had to be told.

"Oh, dear! Oh, dear!" sighed Iola happily, when, at last, the tale was ended. "It is just like a story out of a book; and I wouldn't believe it at all, if I couldn't see the gold piled up right in front of me. Now," and her eyes looked wonderingly at the bags of gold, "how much is all that gold worth? Is it worth a Hundred Thousand Dollars?" and her eyes grew big with the thought of the enormous wealth that lay within touch of her hand.

"I reckon it is," laughed Mr. Conroyal. "But, supposing we see just about how much it is worth. Thure, you and Bud go and get the big scales, and we will weigh it."

In a few minutes the two boys returned, carrying between them a small platform scales, capable of weighing a few hundred pounds at a time, and set it down by the side of the pile of bags of gold.

Mr. Conroyal now placed the bags of gold, four at a time, on the scales, and announced their weights; and Thure and Bud, pencils and paper in their hands, set down the amounts. When the last bag had been weighed, all waited anxiously while the two boys added up the various amounts. Thure was the first to finish the addition.

"Five thousand one hundred and three and a half pounds!" he yelled.

"Exactly what I got," announced Bud a moment later.

"Give me the pencil and paper," and Mr. Conroyal caught the pencil and paper from Thure's hands. "I'll see about what that amount of gold is worth," and he began figuring on the paper, with hands that trembled just a little with excitement. Presently he looked up, his face flushed and his eyes shining.

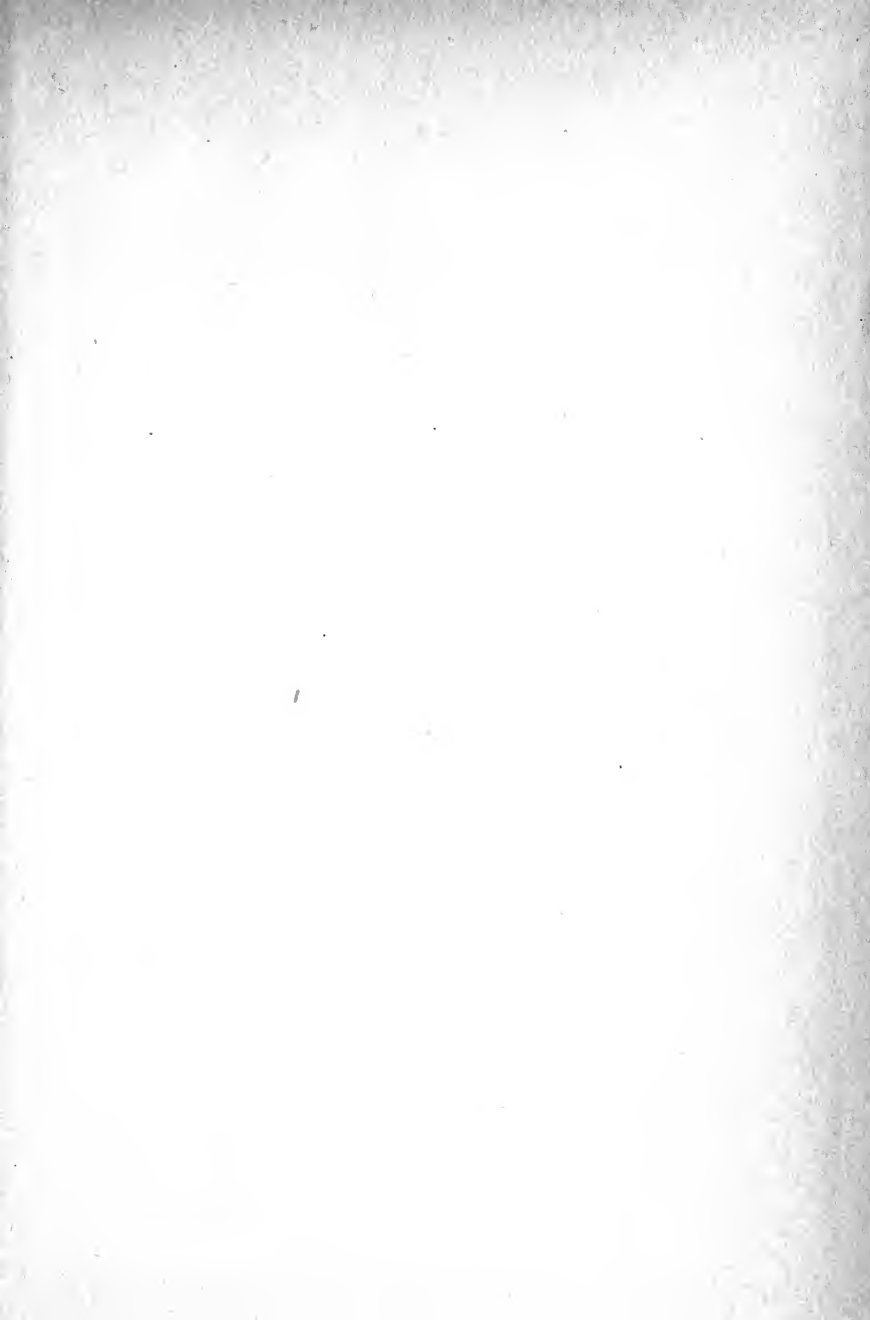
"Of course I can't tell exactly how much the gold is worth," he said, "not knowing exactly how much it will bring an ounce; but, I am sure we can count on its bringing a Million Dollars, a Million Dollars, boys! And that, since there were ten in the company, will give each one of us at least One Hundred Thousand Dollars!"

"Great Moses! That means that we are all rich! Hurrah!" and Thure jumped to his feet and yelled so loudly that Iola thrust her mantilla over his mouth, fearing that the glad noise might bring the roof down on their heads.

"And that we can now go to our dear home in New York," Mrs. Dickson said softly, pressing the hand she held of her husband and looking happily into his eyes.







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